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A Sacramental Hermeneutic in Literature and Liturgy

Mark Anthony Godin, BA, MA, MDiv

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Glasgow

Department of Theology and Religious Studies
Faculty of Arts

September 2009

Abstract

This thesis asks the question: what does it mean to “discern the body” (1 Cor. 11:29)? Answering this begins with the question’s origin in the sacramental context of a particular Christian community’s attempt to observe what became known as the Eucharist. In their physicality, sacraments act as reminders that theological concepts, while they systematise experience and knowledge, can never be simply abstract; theology must never forget the particular, discrete nature of human beings, the separation of creatures, the otherness that allows true plurality and mutuality.

My thesis is divided in three parts, to address bodies and their stories in theory, literary art, and sacramental liturgy. The first part of the thesis offers a critical reading of various theologies of body and story, applying to them insights from feminist epistemology concerning situated knowledge. The critique examines the work of Graham Ward, Stanley Hauerwas, Marcella Althaus-Reid, and Paul Ricoeur, looking at the way that even their attempts to take the body into account tend to downplay the concreteness of particular people and their stories.

The second part of the thesis explores the way that literature handles the problems of particularity and universality, looking at specific stories in specific novels, and examining the way they treat bodies and the meeting of bodies. I address five novels. In conversation with *Anil’s Ghost*, by Michael Ondaatje, I discuss the importance of touch in defining meaning. With *A Map of Glass*, by Jane Urquhart, I look at bodies as tactile maps and geographies of memory. *Fugitive Pieces*, by Anne Michaels, leads me to a discussion of the place of artistic form in the determination of meaning both for the body and for literature. *The Man on a Donkey*, by H. F. M. Prescott, leads to reflections upon disjunctions in bodies as various narratives make claims upon them. The discussion of *Godric*, by Frederick Buechner, centres upon personal identity being constructed physically, artistically and relationally through proximity with others.

The third part investigates the nature of sacraments and sacramental theology as a place of attending to both the abstract and the particular, to the person—seeking a geography of love. To do this, I begin with a discussion of the search for a normative liturgical pattern as exemplified by Dom Gregory Dix’s *The Shape of the Liturgy*, focusing on the consequences for acknowledging the unruliness of the materiality of bodies. I then examine the approach of Gordon W. Lathrop, who uses the image of the map for describing liturgy. But his use of this metaphor construes the liturgical map as a given, turning away from interactive, creative possibilities. As a response, I look to the theologian Charles Winquist, who writes about the particularity of love. Finally, I bring together my reflections from the first two parts of the thesis to make suggestions about the liturgical body: that it is discerned by paying attention to the stories that the body carries, to the relationships in which bodies are implicated and to their locations, and to the vulnerabilities manifested by love and grief, by care.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations occur in the notes after the first appearance of the relevant work. Full publishing details may be found in the bibliography.

AG	<i>Anil's Ghost</i> , by Michael Ondaatje
BCW	<i>The Book of Common Worship</i> of The Presbyterian Church in Canada
BP	<i>The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World</i> , by Elaine Scarry
BM	<i>Bodies that Matter</i> , by Judith Butler
CC	<i>Christ and Culture</i> , by Graham Ward
CG	<i>Cities of God</i> , by Graham Ward
CL	'Cleopatra's Love', by Anne Michaels
CTRP	<i>Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice</i> , by Graham Ward
FM	<i>Fallible Man</i> , by Paul Ricoeur
FP	<i>Fugitive Pieces</i> , by Anne Michaels
FS	<i>Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination</i> , by Paul Ricoeur
FST	<i>The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Debates</i> , ed. Sandra Harding
FT/IT	<i>From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God</i> , by Marcella Althaus-Reid
HC	<i>Hipparchia's Choice</i> , by Michèle Le Doeuff
HG	<i>Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology</i> , by Gordon W. Lathrop
HR	<i>The Hauerwas Reader</i>
HT	<i>Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology</i> , by Gordon W. Lathrop
IT	<i>Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics</i> , by Marcella Althaus-Reid
JJ	<i>Jerusalem Journey: Pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the Fifteenth Century</i> , by H. F. M. Prescott
MG	<i>A Map of Glass</i> , by Jane Urquhart
MoaD	<i>The Man on a Donkey</i> , by H. F. M. Prescott
NT	'Narrated Time', by Paul Ricoeur (in <i>A Ricoeur Reader</i>)
OA	<i>Oneself as Another</i> , by Paul Ricoeur
PF	<i>Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence</i> , by Stanley Hauerwas
PI	<i>The Philosophical Imaginary</i> , by Michèle Le Doeuff
PK	<i>The Peacable Kingdom</i> , by Stanley Hauerwas
RR	<i>A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination</i>
QG	<i>The Queer God</i> , by Marcella Althaus-Reid
SD	<i>Skin Divers</i> , by Anne Michaels
ST	<i>Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified</i> , by Stanley Hauerwas
TN	<i>Time and Narrative</i> , by Paul Ricoeur
WOMP	<i>The Weight of Oranges / Miner's Pond</i> , by Anne Michaels

Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

- the Faculty of Arts of the University of Glasgow, for the Overseas Research Student Award and related funds;
- The Presbyterian Church in Canada, for Cameron Doctoral Bursaries;
- my supervisors, Professor David Jasper and Dr Heather Walton, and other members of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies;
- my parents, family and friends;
- and, last but definitely not least, my partner, Alana, for more than my word count allows me to say.



Fingers have a memory,
to read the familiar braille of another's skin.
The body has a memory;
the children we make,
places we've hurt ourselves,
sieves of our skeletons in the fat soil.
No words mean as much as a life.
Only the body pronounces perfectly
the name of another.

(Anne Michaels, from 'Words for the Body')

ntroduction

And the Word became flesh and dwelt in us, and we saw his glory, a glory as the only one from the Father, full of grace and of truth.

John 1:14

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.

John 6:56

Therefore Jesus went outside, while wearing the thorny crown and the purple robe. And [Pilate] said to them, 'Behold the human being!'

John 19:5¹

* * *



What does it mean to discern the body?

In this thesis, I seek an answer to that question. My method is interdisciplinary, drawing upon theology, literature, and liturgy. Here, to discern the body is to practise a sacramental hermeneutic. A sacramental hermeneutic is not primarily for interpreting sacraments themselves, however, but instead goes in the other direction: sacraments, in the physicality through which they join materiality and meaning, provide a key for interpreting the relational nature of bodies in all their particular contingencies, their flesh-and-blood untidiness and vitality. To discern the body is not to consider the body as first and foremost a stepping-stone to a metaphor, nor is it to hold the body as a *tabula rasa* which waits to be filled with values and understandings. Practising a sacramental hermeneutic entails attending to bodies made known in their proximity to one another, in their desires and weaknesses, their fear of frailty in the touch just as much as their joy in skin's contact.²

¹ These verses are my own translations from Aland, et al., *The Greek New Testament*. Unless noted otherwise, Biblical quotations in this thesis are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² None of this discourse on bodies could proceed without the benefit of many other conversations, queries and reflections. Sociological and socio-historical investigations such as those by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*, Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, and Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* intersect to form a theoretical matrix behind any contemporary discussions on the nature and meaning of the body, and the importance of embodiment for thinking about how human beings relate to one another and to the world around us. Works of theology, Biblical studies, and church history also shape the context of this thesis. As exemplified in works as diverse as John A. T. Robinson's *The Body*, Peter Brown's *The Body and Society*, James B. Nelson's *Body Theology*, Paula M. Cooley's *Religious Imagination and the Body*, Diane L. Prosser MacDonald's *Transgressive Corporeality*, Caroline Walker Bynum's *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, Dale B. Martin's *The Corinthian Body*, and Eugene F. Rogers, Jr.'s *Sexuality*

Because of links between body and story and between person and person, because of the very physicality of such elements as water, bread and wine, and of the contact between those elements and participants, this sacramental hermeneutic functions as a check against any theological tendency towards an abstraction which diminishes the value of creation's materiality. Discerning the body suggests that a proper theological account of all that is not only attempts to formulate a truth that is valid ultimately and everywhere, but also should address the needs and desires of particular people and the relationships portrayed in their particular stories. This has a number of implications. Paying attention to the body acts as a call to keep form in mind when doing theology: in essence, this means treating theology as a type of creative writing. This also suggests that theology as a discipline should go beyond tolerance in accepting a plurality of accounts of truth; if bodies are particular, then they are also partial—they cannot include everything within their bounds—and if they are partial, then the best way to seek a fuller understanding of creation and life is through collaboration with those who hold to those different accounts. Difference, together with partiality, suggests that bodies, in their distinctiveness, need one another in a dialogical relationship of support. In the end, a sacramental hermeneutic asks people to make room for one another, for other bodies and other stories, without forgetting their own accounts.

To explore such a sacramental hermeneutic, this thesis begins with a survey of various theological viewpoints on bodies and their narrated relationships, then moves in the second part to studies of novels and what they might declare about embodiment,

and the Christian Body, Christian theologians of many different perspectives have attempted expositions of what the body is according to faith.

Theological scholarship concerning the body is even more complex because, beside the many works unraveling the specific religious significance of the human body, Christian theologians add discussions relating to the doctrine of incarnation; see Sallie McFague's *The Body of God* and Margaret R. Miles's *The Word Made Flesh*. Connected to this are investigations into churches' ritual practices which both to describe and to prescribe that relationship between the body of God and human bodies (and the world), particularly in discussions of the theology of sacraments. In writing a thesis which looks at the body and sacraments, I follow in the footsteps of a long line of thinkers, and my own perspective is shaped (consciously and unconsciously) by such works of the past century as Gregory Dix's *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Donald M. Baillie's *The Theology of the Sacraments & other papers*, James F. White's *Sacraments as God's Self Giving*, John D. Zizioulas's *Being as Communion*, B.A. Gerrish's *Grace and Gratitude*, Gordon Lathrop's *Holy Things*, and Louis-Marie Chauvet's *The Sacraments*. Pointing to liturgical scholarship actually brings us full circle, inasmuch as many of the liturgical theologians of the last century have situated their work alongside theorists of the body and religion, particularly in the case of anthropologists, like Catherine Bell, who have presented ritual as embodied practice; for example, see her *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Even when they seem to ignore one another, all of these discourses are bound together in exceedingly complex ways, and generate the context and the background for any discussion of the issues involved with notions of the body.

before ending with an examination of liturgy in the light of both of these sets of investigations.

But I am leaping ahead a little too quickly.

When Paul, writing his first letter to the Corinthians, recorded what is probably the first account of the Lord's Supper, he put the narrative into a very specific context. He was admonishing the members of the Corinthian church for shortcomings in their behaviour toward one another—particularly for the failure of those with wealth and power to apportion respect to the poor and needy. Instead of sharing, some ate like gluttons while others went hungry, all in what was supposed to be a context of worship.³ To address this, Paul reminded his readers of the events at the heart of their liturgical meal and the exhortation Jesus gave to shape their action: 'Do this in remembrance of me'.⁴ Although Paul explicitly connects this with Christ's death and anticipated return,⁵ the act of re-memorating Jesus the Christ—piecing together again the fragments of his person, his story, his body—also means holding on to the character of his life and ethical teaching. Accordingly, Paul goes on to state that

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.⁶

The proper celebration of communion is thus tied to seeing and recognising, being attuned to the form and physical being of a person or persons—'discerning the body'. At first glance, the body requiring discernment is Jesus', but, in the context of an epistle whose previous chapter asks rhetorically if sharing bread is not a sharing in Christ, 'body' increases its reference to incorporate at least the members of the Christian community.⁷ However, one could take a still larger view, reading this as not confined to an identification of one's own group of friends and family, but as a call for consideration of the enfleshed needs of all God's embodied creatures. In this wider

³ 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:24.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:26.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:27-29.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:16-17.

interpretation, ‘discerning the body’ involves paying attention to the neighbour, the stranger, the one who is other than you, as well as oneself; it places bodies in relationship.⁸

But, again, what exactly does it mean to discern the body?

Here are two sets of options.

I. Three Stories

A man stands before a hostile crowd, exposed to their scrutiny. He has just been tried, flogged and humiliated. Soldiers mock him by clothing him in a purple gown, and abuse him by placing a crown of thorns upon his head. This beaten man stands at the precarious point when a decision is about to be made on the fate of his life, and his judge says, ‘Behold the human being!’

In this image from John’s Gospel, the evangelist proclaims that the essence of humanity is demonstrated in the vulnerability of mortality, that being human is inextricably connected to one’s physical existence. We are shown that human nature is

⁸ The phrase in New Testament Greek is ‘διακρίνων το σῶμα’ (see Aland, 1 Corinthians 11:29, 594). According to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Frederick William Danker, *et al.*, eds., 231) the word as used in this verse means to ‘recognise’, and the verb falls within the semantic range of ‘to evaluate by paying careful attention to’. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the word appears in Matthew 16:3, where it refers to interpretation, specifically the ability ‘to interpret the appearance of the sky’ (NRSV). Danker, *et al.*, also point to the word being used thus in the Septuagint’s translation of Job (12:11 and 23:10), passages in which the NRSV translates the it as forms of the verb ‘to test’. The notions of evaluation and interpretation seem to go together here, so that ‘discerning the body’ refers to seeing the body correctly and acknowledging its essential character.

It should be noted that Martin’s perspective on the body and its permeability in 1 Cor. leads to a somewhat narrower interpretation of this passage. While he argues that ‘body’ here refers to a number of different things—the bread shared in the Eucharist, the body of Christ, the Church, and the bodies of individual Christians—Martin does restrict Paul’s resulting exhortations to a charitable ethic particular to the Christian community. ‘Discerning the body’ is necessary to keep Christians from participating unworthily in the sacrament and bringing judgement upon themselves; to discern the body rightly would mean to cease acting in a schismatic way that hurts other members of the body of Christ (see *The Corinthian Body*, 190-7). William T. Cavanaugh, in *Torture and Eucharist*, presents a similar interpretation, though emphasising the reference to the corporate Church, in order to argue that excommunication of those who sinfully damage the body of Christ (such as torturers) is the only conscientious thing to do when eating and drinking the bread and wine unworthily can kill a person; the hope is that the excommunicated people will repent and be able to discern the body once again (246). However, although these and other commentators do not go further with the idea of ‘discerning the body’ than the boundaries of Christian communities, I still argue that the passage can bear an expanded reference, not just because it does not explicitly read ‘discerning the body of Christ’. If it does refer to the way Christians should act—to an ethics of the body which is based upon love—then there is no reason to confine that body to a Christian one. Even Cavanaugh, in an earlier mention of 1 Cor. 11:29, has no problem connecting Paul’s chastising of Christians who fail to discern the body to Ignatius’ complaints about those who spare no thought for ‘the afflicted, the captive, the hungry or the thirsty’ (*Torture and Eucharist*, 231).

enfleshed in the body: a person is made manifest in the space and time of the world by filling up a particular space and taking up a particular time with one's material presence. In this scene, we human beings, pointedly and poignantly, are embodied creatures.

This is easy enough to declare. We perceive the world through our senses; we become aware of our location on this earth through the extension of our matter, in air, against the ground, in relation to one another. Yet, even more than this, when Pilate declares, 'Behold the human being!' and points to Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, he is pointing to a man in a particular predicament. He presents a man in the fully evident weakness of his flesh, a man at the mercy of the world around him. If being human indicates embodiment, then embodiment means recognizing the fragility of the body, the ease at which our matter may disintegrate, as shown in the fourth Gospel. Here is the human person, the human body, made manifest, not in the deeds of power which John recounts, not in turning water into wine or making the blind see, but in standing, exposed, at the dawn of one's last day. What you get is what you see, too—or, rather, how you see: to gaze upon this being who has been exposed means being exposed yourself, means being naked at the point of your own fragility.

A man stands at the window, looking out at the street. He has resisted the urge to pick up his mobile phone, to call, to check the time again. None of that would bring his beloved home faster; worse, it might make her think that he was trying to control her by keeping tabs on her every move. Telling her about how, at this point in their relationship, every absence opens a door to the fear that she will not return would not, could not, perhaps should not, make her change her mind on those matters. So he waits, teetering on a knife edge of anticipation, straining for the least sign of a familiar shadow on the pavement.

The problem is that he does not know what to do with his body. He picks up a book, puts it down. He picks it up again, flips it open, but does not really attend to the words while he reads a sentence, maybe two—he is not sure—before lowering the volume out of reading range. The man becomes conscious that his foot is tapping anxiously. He neatens the flotsam on the table near the window. He looks outside again. He would pace, but that would mean moving too far from his vantage point. And when she arrives, should he be at the door already? Or should he try sitting as nonchalantly as possible, writing maybe, doing something else, averting his gaze as soon as he knows

it's her who is coming up the walk? But his body will not let him stay still, upsetting his every attempt to remain anchored in place.

This, too, is the body's vulnerability, this desire for another's presence. The heart beats time with footsteps closing down the distance, and has no defence. Disorder accompanies the tuning of the gaze towards an irreplaceable beloved: this particular one, in becoming precious to you, calls on you to rearrange the habits of your body, learning another body's rhythms and another voice's timbre, the shape of the space that limbs gather to themselves. Turning towards another creates the potential to miss them when they are gone. The man at the window knows by heart a couplet by one of his favourite poets, cutting clear in subtle simplicity: 'To love as if we'd choose/ even the grief'.⁹ This is why his body whirls near the window, like a tiny compass needle in the field of the world, seeking its magnetic north.

Of course, the aches of embodied desire hold more than the promise of future suffering. They also offer the possibility of someone who knows you back, who chooses to walk beside you and keep you company. The body's vulnerability waits for the lilt of the steps up the pavement. If being human means being embodied, and being embodied is described in the proximity of one to another, being an embodied human being means recognising that fragility can be made manifest in joy, too. Bodies turn and call one another:

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face, let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely.¹⁰

Embodiment lies in the unpredictability of the turn and the call, in offering to the beloved the serious levity of dancing, the laughter of a kiss, the spark of touch.

It is, perhaps, but a step away from those two moments to a third instance of the body. Bread and wine sit upon a table. A minister stands at the edge, in front of the people, inviting them to join. The minister prays and picks up the bread, fracturing it, breaking it in half while repeating words attributed to Jesus, 'This is my body which is

⁹ SD 63.

¹⁰ Song of Songs 2:13b-14.

for you'.¹¹ No matter how hard the minister tries, that fraction is not neat and cannot be contained; crumbs scatter, even though they might only be seen in the aftermath. The bread is shared out in fragments, then handed person to person, and eaten.

To what, exactly, does the 'this' refer, though? Is it the bread, lifted up, presented before the people? Is it the action of fracture or, more precisely, the bread as it is broken, the bread being shared, so that the body is the collection of fragments even as they are dispersed to be consumed? Is it the group that has gathered to partake, this disparate worshipping community, or even the minister recapitulating the action of the institution of the Lord's Supper? Or is 'this' the entirety of these things, and more? Any simple connection of 'this' to 'body' and to 'bread' is challenged by the imprecision of the language that is used. Meaning arises from the overall complexity of the event. The fluidity of the terms and instability of the sense echo the uncontainability and, vulnerability of the human body made manifest by Pilate's presentation of Jesus and by the anxieties of a lover's heart. The possibilities of elements, words, remembrances, actions and shifting relationships generate meaning in their dynamic contact with one another, sparking off touch and encounter in the multiple understandings of body, flesh and blood.

Nothing stays still in this world of liturgy. Meetings shift boundaries. A ritual action of devotion meets the remembered story of a faith tradition meets the comedies and tragedies of the participating bodies. In contact, one body can become aware of another, and can change direction in relation to that other—for a moment of possibility, at least. Even then the moment cannot be taken for granted. After the minister breaks the bread, when the servers are distributing the body's pieces to the bodies, eyes meet and share a knowing and known glance—or eyes are cast down, turned away, seeing nothing but a pew's dusty wood or the plate laden with bread. One person strains to catch every word, feels an intensity of connection with everyone in that place. Another person is so worried about acting out of turn—do you hold onto the bread when it comes, or do you eat it right away, and how exactly is the wine served?—that the Eucharist is nothing but an anxiety of motions.

¹¹ The words, as they appear in the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19) and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11:24), vary slightly, but the phrase 'This is my body' occurs in all four instances. The liturgical rendition of the saying is also variable, with the most common insertion being that this body 'is *broken* for you'.

But maybe even if one sees only the bread, or cannot look farther than the wine, this is a sufficient beginning. Maybe it still permits Christ to be present, bidding us to open our eyes and to listen, to turn outwards and make room for those who are not ourselves. Maybe this bread, this loaf of fashioned grain torn and eaten, is enough sustenance to bid a person to a passion for the presence of another. Maybe this wine is enough of a sip of joy to gain a taste for the euphoria of other people's idiosyncratic truths. Maybe it is enough to lead bodies to share their stories, and know as they are known—to begin discerning the body.

II. Disciplinary Negotiations

What does it mean to discern the body? One way to respond, the way attempted above, is to attend to the body's poetry, reading the word that the form of the flesh inscribes upon the world in the act of living. This way attempts to imagine the truths of the body through artistic presentation and evocation. The route is as inexhaustible as creativity; although I presented three vignettes, the possible depictions of the body in relationship with other bodies are endless.

A second way to go about answering the question is one, perhaps, more appropriate for a doctoral thesis: the essay of exposition, an attempt to dissect and ascertain meaning using all the scholarly tools available. The researcher engages in conscientious dialogue with all those who have trod this ground before. This way, finding out what it means to discern the body requires painstakingly and logically weighing evidence and setting parameters for judging the nature of bodies and their relationships. Such a method applies to literary studies and theology: paying attention to both requires careful, prosaic work—systematically outlining connections, trying to make realities plain and understandable. Still, the first path—that of story and poetry—can never be far away. The untidy fleshiness of the body resists total systematisation. In other words, what explanatory discourses reveal about bodies cannot cover every nuance of the reality of human experience; creative, artistic discourses also speak of realities. Not that these two paths of discourse are totally distinct from each other, one picking up where the other leaves off: they intermingle, existing at different levels of tension in the same space, wandering over each other's terrain. That is why this thesis is actually interdisciplinary in (at least) two ways. First, it attempts to do both a theological and a literary study of bodies and their relationships. Second, the style shifts

as the subject demands; sometimes a more poetic register of reflection encroaches upon the explicative in my attempt to account for the unruliness of bodies.

The interdisciplinary nature of this thesis also arises from my investigation's liturgical context—that is, from its foundation in a discussion of sacraments. Liturgy itself, as the worship discourse of a faith community, has a hybrid nature; it contains elements that function both theologically and artistically. While the ordering of prayers, hymns, sacraments, and preaching expresses a community's theological beliefs, the communication of knowledge about a faith is only a part of liturgy; liturgical practice also involves the attempt to orient participants towards a posture of responding to God's gifts and to human needs and desires. There is a creative aspect to even the most set form of liturgy. The experience of liturgy can thus be considered interdisciplinary, and the thesis echoes this by trying to follow where paying careful attention to bodies and their relationships might lead.¹²

The work proceeds by assuming certain principles. First, bodies are specific to particular locations and times; they have locality and position. This means that one of the chief characteristics of a body is that it is physically limited: in a very real sense, a body is distinct from its surroundings, or from other bodies, though the boundaries which keep that body discrete are, paradoxically, simultaneously irreducible and porous.

¹² It should be noted that 'liturgy' is almost as hard to define as 'body'. Commentators sometimes choose to begin etymologically, as Harmon K. Smith does in the preface to his book *Where Two or Three Are Gathered*, noting that 'The literal meaning of liturgy is "the people's work"', before continuing to explain that 'in the pages which follow, a community's liturgy serves as one of the principal ways in which we do our work of prayer' (xi). Such definitions seem to provide a general method for describing the worship discourse of any faith community. However, it appears that Christian liturgists and liturgical theologians have a marked tendency to slip from 'liturgy' to '*the* liturgy' without making a clear distinction. Smith does this in his preface's very next sentence: 'Understood as a form of prayer, the liturgy throughout adores and praises and petitions and worships God' (xi). The definite article narrows the reference, and also suggests that there is some universal liturgy behind any actual liturgical practice. Gordon Lathrop, after referring to 'the liturgy' both as a synonym for 'the Sunday meeting' of the Church and as 'the ancient name of the assembly for worship and its actions', writes that 'the similarity—in the patterns and in the problems, in the full Christian heritage and in the current human horizon—of all the actual local gatherings for worship makes possible an ecumenical liturgical theology' (HT, 1, 3, 4). I suspect the use of the definitive article springs from a desire to account for an excessive nature in worship; that is, what happens during worship in word and action cannot be exhaustively defined—it is unruly, much like the body. (See HT 5) Appealing to '*the* liturgy' functions to reach towards a mystical realm to help explain the way liturgy seems to mean more than what literally is said and done. The difficulty that arises from this is the slippage towards a confusion in terms, from 'liturgy' used as a general descriptive category and 'liturgy' used as a name for a very specific theological role of the Christian Church, such as in the definition supplied by J. D. Crichton: that liturgy is 'the communal celebration by the Church, which is Christ's body and in which he with the Holy Spirit is active, of the paschal mystery' (Crichton 28). To help forestall any confusion here, references to 'liturgy' in this thesis are to the more general term, unless otherwise noted.

Second, each human body is distinct and individual in its character. Third, the body carries its story with it. Bodies have a history, a narrative which is available for interpretation; the form of the body is not static, but alters over time. As Jean Vanier has written, '[w]e are the fruit of our history, the sum of all that we have experienced since our conception; each event, happy or sad, is inscribed in our flesh, and even if our memory does not remember it, our body, itself, remembers everything'.¹³ Because of our existence as embodied creatures, being born, growing old, and dying, all while interacting with the world around us, our bodies function as living narratives, marked by experience and encounter. But I would expand Vanier's summary of the storied nature of the body to include a person's connection to ancestors and descendants; these also give form to a body. Fourth, a human body is actually many bodies. One can understand one's body through many different systems all at the same time: one can have a religious body, a biological body, a social body, and more. The same boundaries that make each body discrete also generate plurality by organising matter into separate entities.

These assumptions are important because they govern the discussion and method of my thesis. If bodies are particular, and specifically located, and if they carry stories and exist in plurality, then any account which reduces or sidesteps this complexity ignores a portion of reality, potentially allowing some facets of life and being to slip by unperceived. The body's form, the shape of what plays on and under the skin, the eye on the predicament of the heart: all of these things, and more, tell us something of the true weight of a person. While Christian theology, in part because of the doctrine of the incarnation, does not ignore creation and the materiality of life, Christian theologians have not always accounted for the form of the body when considering the nature and function of human beings. Too often, meaning has been separated from matter, and the latter seen merely as a vehicle for some other real substance.¹⁴ This provides another

¹³ Jean Vanier, *La source des larmes* 43. My translation from the French text: 'Nous sommes le fruit de notre histoire, la somme de tout ce que nous avons vécu depuis notre conception; chaque événement, heureux ou malheureux, s'est inscrit dans notre chair, et même si notre mémoire ne s'en souvient pas, notre corps, lui, se souvient de tout.'

¹⁴ Or worse. Douglas John Hall, while decrying the paucity of traditional Christian theology's profession of the goodness of creation, notes that one can 'discern a strong propensity to equate sin and finitude' (*Professing the Faith* 81). To the degree that form involves the shaping of a body by the binding of its material into a specific and limited location (or range of locations), form and finitude are linked; connecting finitude to the sinful condition of humanity's existence then results in a suggestion that form is only important inasmuch as it reflects something that is not chained to material finitude. Feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, have noted the oppressive consequences of

reason for the interdisciplinarity of this thesis: that the tension between certain literature and certain theology might push towards a stronger consideration of the form of bodies. It could be said that, in literary art, a reader is asked to apprehend the sense of what is being told not just through the content of what is written but also through the *way* it is written—through the sound of phrases, the lie of the letters on the page, and so forth. Thus, works of literature might help teach theologians the significance of form, insofar as most schools of literary studies take an interest in the literary form of a composition.¹⁵

What all this discussion of meetings between disciplines and genres translates into is the basic structure of this thesis: theology, literature, liturgy. Before I move on, however, some further foundational matters remain. First, there remains the question of definition: what, exactly, *is* the body? After that, I examine works that move in similar territory, and propose why this project is different. This introduction then ends by mapping out what follows in the remainder of this thesis.

Defining Bodies

One of the problems with theological discourse about bodies arises from the elusive meaning of the word ‘body’. When you speak about a body, you could be speaking of quite a wide range of possible things or situations, a range that is extremely challenging to delimit. The word refers to several different organisations of matter: a

a theological adoption of a hierarchy of meaning (spirit) over matter, especially in the way some persons and creatures are portrayed as more earthy, more connected to their finite, material forms, and so less valued (see Ruether, ‘Woman, Body, and Nature: Sexism and the Theology of Creation’, *Sexism and God-Talk* 72-92). From another point of view, Charles E. Winquist begins his project *Desiring Theology* with a reflection upon the type of thinking at the heart of theology from the Enlightenment to the end of the twentieth century. He posits that the end project of the philosophy of René Descartes in his search for certainty was ‘a smaller world than the world he began with’ (Winquist 14). The thinking such a philosophy heralded—and which theology took up—excluded all that was not neat and distinct, including the messiness of the body. (It should be noted that, in response, Winquist called for a ‘messier’ interrogation in which ‘Truth, instead of being a clean, well-lit place, will be an experiment that will include in its data the body and its desires’ (Winquist 15).

¹⁵ This is not to say that literature eclipses theology, or that all theologians are ignorant of questions concerning form (I have already referred to the work of Charles Winquist, and another example would be Rubem A. Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*). Instead, I am arguing that the accounts of the body given in much of theology and those given in much of literature go about their work in different ways, such that a meeting of the two is fruitful for my essay in discerning the body. In their attempts to imagine worlds, some novelists and poets pay a great deal of attention to form; in this thesis, I explore some examples of this.

part of an existing whole (e.g. a 'torso'); the physical fabric of a particular person or other creature; a collection of individuals. Where theology and religious studies are concerned, it appears that a frequent solution to the thorny issue of definition is avoidance. For example, the entry 'Body' in the book *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* never states what precisely the body is (beyond the use of the adjective 'human') and uses most of its pages to discuss what might be done religiously and ethically to or with this nondescript body.¹⁶ This shrug of the shoulders is not restricted to theological discourse, as can be seen in *The Oxford Companion to the Body*, a reference work which attempts to present the body from the perspective of both science and the humanities; the *Companion's* preface begins by declaring that

We are our bodies. The evolution of humanity is the adaptation of bodies. Bodies are the tangible material of being. Bodies contain us, restrain us, perplex us, attract us, disgust us. They are the objects of most of the thoughts and actions of human beings. Scientists, writers, artists and poets are bodies with a mission. It is no surprise that the mission has centred so intensely on the body itself.¹⁷

This suggestion that the body is that aspect of a human being that can be touched is the closest to a definition that the reference work offers. Even this must be teased out from competing statements, first that 'We are our bodies' and then that 'Bodies are the tangible material of being'. Bodies are subjects ('we' equals 'our bodies') and objects (of human 'thoughts and actions') at the same time. Bodies seem to slide back and forth between being human persons and being some 'other' which can act upon us.

As long as the word fits under such broad headings as 'human', 'material', and 'form', 'body' can mean almost anything. But if this is so, is there not a danger that it could also mean nothing? The sociologist Bryan S. Turner summarizes the paradoxical problem in the introduction to the first edition of *The Body and Society*:

In writing this study of the body, I have become increasingly less sure of what the body is. The paradoxes illustrate the confusion. The body is a material organism, but also a metaphor; it is the trunk apart from head and limbs, but also the person (as in 'anybody' and 'somebody'). The body may also be an aggregate of bodies, often with legal personality as in 'corporation' or in 'the mystical body of Christ'. Such aggregate bodies may be regarded as legal fictions or as social facts which exist independently of the 'real' bodies which happen to constitute them. There are also immaterial bodies which are possessed by ghosts, spirits, demons and angels. In some cultures, such immaterial bodies may have

¹⁶ William R. LaFleur, 'Body', *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* 36-54.

¹⁷ Colin Blakemore and Sheila Jennett, Preface, *The Oxford Companion to the Body*.

major social roles and have important social locations within the system of stratification. There are also persons with two bodies, such as mediaeval kings who occupied simultaneously their human body and their sovereign body. Then there are heavenly bodies, the geometry of bodies in space, the harmony of spheres and corpuscular light. Given this elusive quality of 'the body', it is perhaps appropriate that the Old English *bodig*, corresponding to the Old High German *botah*, is of unknown origin. Like *ontic*, *bodig* is everywhere and nowhere. The body is our most immediate and omnipresent experience of reality and its solidity, but it may also be subjectively elusive.¹⁸

All of this suggests that, rather than one 'body', there are many. They nest within one another, and as they do so, they rub off on one another semantically. You cannot isolate one understanding of the body from other understandings, one body from the others.¹⁹

In their consideration of these many bodies, theorists have developed various methods for coping with the elusive nature of an irreducibly material body. Judith Butler begins her landmark work, *Bodies that Matter*, with several quotations, including this one from Gayatri Spivak:

¹⁸ Bryan S. Turner, *The Body & Society* 42.

¹⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s entry for 'Body' contains an amusingly bewildering array of definitions, clustered under five broad headings, which start with 'The material frame of man (and animals)' and move from there until ending with a group referring to 'body' as a technical or scientific term for disparate entities (*OED*, vol. II 354-5). A reader can observe a number of interesting notions from the *Dictionary*. 1. While the entry attempts to be as generic as possible, it retains the old-fashioned (and exclusivist) term 'man' for 'human being', inadvertently reminding us that human bodies are not homogeneous: 'man' as a word for the species ignores women, calling attention to the fact that bodies are sexual and gendered. 2. There can be quite an eccentric fluidity under a single heading. For example, in the first group, concerning the 'material frame', definitions include: the structure of a creature, or material organism; a corpse; the application of the word to the element of bread in the Eucharist; and obsolete 'oaths and forcible ejaculations' such as 'God's body!' (*OED*, II, 354). This reinforces the sense of the multiplicity of usages of the word. 3. One of the groups of meanings refers to 'body' as a synonym for 'person' or 'individual'; this includes a definition of the word as 'The material being of man, as the sign and tangible part of his individuality, taken for the whole, the person' (*OED*, II, 355). Here, the body is not the whole, but only 'taken for the whole', so that, the physical presence of a person is deemed a walking, breathing synecdoche. On the one hand, this points to a dualistic tendency in thought about the body—if the body is a sign, what matters more is whatever it is that the body is a sign of—a tendency persisting throughout the *OED*'s entry, which includes phrases such as 'often contrasted with the *soul*' (*OED*, II, 354, italics in original) and associates the body with the material as opposed to the immaterial. On the other hand, the tangibility of this sign also suggests that what cannot be seen or touched can only be known through that which can be seen or touched. The body as sign becomes the mediator of personality and individual identity. 4. Another main group of definitions comes under the heading 'A corporate body, aggregate of individuals, collective mass' (*OED*, II, 355). With this, applying the term 'body' to a collective gives it an organic character. It also suggests that the whole is greater than any of its individual parts—that the organisation has a more important place than the individual people who compose it. Such an extrapolation of the creaturely body to a collective becomes a way to theorise the body at a distance from its vulnerability; that is, the emphasis on the aggregate whole is an emphasis on the desired neatness of organisational structure rather than the untidiness of flesh and blood.

If one really thinks about the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such. There are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body. The body, as such, cannot be thought, and I certainly cannot approach it.²⁰

In other words, the body is the understanding with which you fill it; the idea that the body has ‘value codings’ suggests that what defines the body are the values with which a human being encodes that body, whether theirs or other’s. In this formulation, ‘body as such’, then, does not really exist. The body becomes the arena of various understandings of what humanity is, how society functions, and how human consciousness meets the world.

Further on, Butler demonstrates more fully how this approach to the body works. She writes that

The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified* as *prior*. This signification produces as an *effect* of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to signify and discover as that which *precedes* its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification.²¹

Butler argues that our language about the body (with language taken quite broadly, including both words and communicative practices) is what produces the body—at least, our language produces our understanding of the body. She notes a circularity: the assumption that the body is irreducible as the locus of the expression of human experience functions, in itself, as an act of language; the body can never simply be the starting point of linguistic expression. Instead, any claim about the body also defines the body. The key word here is ‘performative’. Any systems of signs which constellate around the body perform what their speakers mean when they say the word ‘body’. This performativity works not as an instantaneous change, but as a habit, instances repeated over time.²² The identifications of a body’s shape receive form over time, as a plurality of rituals, or reiterations of practices, accruing from biological, social and personal

²⁰ Qtd. in BM 1.

²¹ BM 30. Italics in original

²² BM 9-10.

sources, such that they become difficult to untangle from one another, at least in terms of chronological priority.²³

To the extent that the body becomes the site for investigations into the function of the organisation of matter, theorists admit little need to define what the body is. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault portrays the body as the location where power works its hegemony over human flesh. While charting the evolution of punishment in Europe and North America and the rise of the modern prison, Foucault notes the way the ‘politics of the body’ involved in societal acts of justice changed from an inscribing of monarchical sovereignty in the flesh of criminals to a system in which punishment applied to a body transformed it into a sign of the proper order of things for all who witnessed it, then to an understanding of punishment as the training of the body to make a person fit their place in society.²⁴ The book chronicles the social body’s implication of power within the physical body. Mary Douglas’s account of the body in her classic work, *Purity and Danger*, is quite similar. Writing about the beliefs of various societies concerning bodily pollution and purification, she declares that ‘We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body’.²⁵ Douglas examines rules of cleanness and uncleanness, arguing that the physical body’s regulation through ritual represents the social relations of the body politic. Although one presents the body as symbolic and the other as demonstrative of society’s beliefs, both Douglas and Foucault investigate the individual body in order to illuminate aggregate bodies. The body is defined as a microcosm of society, and treated as a resource for understanding the macrocosm.

²³ Butler’s primary interest in BM lies with the formation of gender and sexuality. If the body’s materiality depends upon the nature of social and other practices, then gender or sexuality also is constructed by the systems of signs ritually attached to a person. Butler, however, warns against construing this to mean that any person’s sexual identity is created by their free choice. While her presentation of the performativity of the body denies biological essentialism (that sex and gender are determined genetically and fixed by the physical specifics with which a person is born), this does not mean that biology is not included among the many levels of constraint which shape the body with a ‘forced reiteration of norms’ (94). Butler thus argues that performativity works by imposing upon a body a set of limits within which what a person imagines (and is able to imagine) helps to determine a final shape.

²⁴ Foucault 103, 130-1.

²⁵ Douglas 142.

This theoretical urge to utilise the body as an avenue for exploring social relations causes particular bodies and their stories to fade from view. The more unruly aspects of the body, the messy and concrete oddities of joy and pain alike, elude the focus on organising principles, while that part of the body which represents an overall system stands out. Some theorists do proceed differently: for instance, in *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry examines the body as the site of a person's opening (or closing) to the world. When a person suffers pain or is tortured by another, the world of their imagination contracts to the edge of their flesh; creativity, on the other hand, expands a person's world as experienced through their body.²⁶ To explore this more closely, Scarry first examines human actions which inflict pain and unmake the world (torture and war), and then activities which imagine the body as part of the larger world (religious/political belief, and the fashioning of artefacts), expanding, rather than diminishing, human reach. Rather than being a microcosm of the social body, the flesh-and-blood body functions as a link to what is other than the self. Nonetheless, Scarry never actually defines 'body' beyond referring to it as the point at which person and world meet. Thus, along with Foucault and Douglas, and similar to Butler, Scarry treats the body as a field of inquiry, a locus which attaches to certain narratives about being human.

Bodies and Texts

The body is everything and nothing. Embodiment is every story and none. The body is where we are located in the world, but also where we locate the world, as we socially construct the body and give ourselves direction through our bodies. Is the body itself the great human text, or is the body the medium on which we write—reflective humanity's living parchment, the vulnerable paper of our creative writing? Or are body and blood human pen and ink for the stories that we leave on the skin of earth and time?

The problem is that none of these ideas is wrong. Whenever one tries to talk about 'the body and theology/story/sacraments/humanity/meaning/world/love/scripture/other', one finds that subject and object in the discussion refuse to stay still. The plurality of meaning attached to the word 'body' undermines any attempt at precise

²⁶ BP 22-3.

definition and subverts any borders one might attempt to erect in an effort to confine the topic of study under one's surveillance. The 'body' is nearly impossible to pin down.

In an article published in 1995, Caroline Bynum describes how reference to the body has meant many different things to many different people.²⁷ Over many disciplines, conversations about the body have multiplied, but each conversation has involved a remarkably isolated group of enquirers, who for the most part remain oblivious to the other conversations going on in the world around them. At the same time, the welter of conversation about the body tends to use the idea of the body—to turn the body into a cipher, a shell shaped by the purpose of the enquirer (as I noted above). Bynum quotes a friend:

“There's so much written about the body,” she groans, “but it all focuses on such a recent period. And in so much of it, the body dissolves into language. The body that eats, that works, that dies, that is afraid—that body just isn't there.”²⁸

To talk about *the* body makes it far too easy to forget that there are many bodies. With that forgetfulness, particularities can collapse; with the collapse of particularity, the danger arises that, since no one body can be *the* body, only the most convenient body will matter.

You can reverse Bynum's observation, however, to note that the persistent unruliness of the body undermines the steadily theoretical corporate body. No body is simply a cog in a machine. The capacity to feel pleasure and pain in one's body, and to attempt to negotiate an understanding or incorporate them into one's character, unsettles any neat categorisation. The idea of the body is fragmented, but those fragments are not separate from each other. This is not only a lexicographical problem. Theologically speaking, interest in the body has involved seeking to control its instability. For example, if you look to the Biblical “body” you will find Leviticus' careful locating of the body within society,²⁹ or the Pauline body which “grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”³⁰ Christian theology has struggled with flesh and body, body and soul, heaven

²⁷ Caroline Bynum, ‘Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective’.

²⁸ Bynum, ‘Why all the fuss’, 1.

²⁹ See, for instance, Leviticus 19:27-8 where certain hairstyles and tattoos are forbidden; these laws are connected to the exclusivity of the Israelites' relationship to God and the way their bodily practices reflect that relationship.

³⁰ Ephesians 2:21. See also throughout 1 Corinthians where Paul dwells upon the nature of the body and its connection to the church as a community as well as its connection to God in Christ.

and earth—all tendencies towards dualism rooted in seeing the body's flesh as both the site of sin and the dwelling place of the incarnate Lord. Christianity admits many "bodies" but seldom permits them to touch one another. Sociology has its own problems with the body; for the most part, that discipline has tried to systematize the body through its place in a culture, to list the effects which social beliefs have upon the human body and aggregates thereof. As Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow note, the tendency has been towards "a sociology *of* the body, which 'objectifies' and 'subjectifies' the body from 'outside'."³¹ But, again, the body refuses to remain still.

This thesis follows a long line of theological projects which have attempted to pin down an understanding of the body. These works fall into several broad categories.

1. Some theologians seek to explore the meaning and significance of the body starting from theological or scriptural doctrine, basically taking a close look at what religious voices say about physical, fleshly life. Mary Timothy Prokes demonstrates this line of thought in *Toward a Theology of the Body*, stating that the book 'locates the *meaning* of embodiment within the core revealed mysteries of the Christian faith' and undertakes to connect 'this meaning to concrete historical experience'.³² Such a project investigates the body according to theological beliefs and reflections on it, focusing on the place of the body in religious culture. Thus, many investigations which follow this route are specifically historical or biblical studies. The works of Caroline Bynum and Margaret Miles fall into this category. Miles writes that 'As the religion of the Incarnation, Christianity is about the construction of Christian bodies and, according to Christian belief, the perfection of Christian bodies in the resurrection of the flesh'.³³ Therefore, the historical approach, as demonstrated by Miles and Bynum, looks not only at what beliefs Christian thinkers expressed, but also at the habitual practices of members of churches at particular times in history and, like all historical investigation, relies on the interpretation of available documentary evidence.

Various biblical studies connect to this historical model in a range of ways. At one end of the spectrum are works like Dale Martin's *The Corinthian Body*, which draws upon an array of sources to produce a portrait of the way Paul and the Corinthians

³¹ Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* 5.

³² Mary Timothy Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body* x.

³³ Miles, *Word Made Flesh* 2.

probably would have understood the notion of ‘body’; Martin places the epistle to the Corinthians in the wider context of the Roman Empire, and uses what is known about mentalities and approaches of that time to interpret the apostle’s writings. At the other end, in *God’s Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible*, Stephen D. Moore performs a close reading of Scripture and interpretations thereof to examine both the affinity of biblical studies with medicine (especially surgery) and the corporeal nature of God. Gathering together textual images of God from the Old Testament and Christ from the New to present a ‘gigantic God’ and a ‘colossal Christ’, whose own bodily self-creation and self-perfection becomes the narcissistic model to which faith calls human beings, he argues that bodybuilding is the best metaphor for being made in God’s image.³⁴ Scholarship such as Martin’s really stands as historical research, focused on a very specific text and time period; Moore’s scholarship is a more explicitly interdisciplinary exploration of textual meaning, though, in the end, the weight of the metaphor tends to lean in one direction, with the images of bodybuilding presented as a way to understand the scriptural body, rather than *vice versa*.

The emphasis of my thesis is neither biblical nor historical. I examine theological texts, and behind these stand readings of the Bible (including my own), but I leave detailed reconstructions of the body in specific eras of the past to the historians and biblical scholars. Instead, this thesis employs literary studies, placing fictional narratives of the body beside those of modern theologians. However, much can be learned from the historical and biblical studies, on which a study like mine depends. I try to heed some of the warnings and instructions they provide. As Caroline Bynum writes, when considering critical questions concerning the body and thinkers concerned with the body, ‘the past is seldom usefully examined by assuming that its specific questions or their settings are the same as those of the present’.³⁵ Theorising the body depends upon the questions that a person asks, and the questions a person asks depend upon the culture in which one lives; I have tried to keep this in mind in my own

³⁴ The first part of Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* describes the Bible as Christ’s risen body and then argues that the science of Biblical criticism is an act of dissection, tracing its rise as having the same historical trajectory as the medical dissection of bodies-become-cadavers (37-73). The second part is an extended comparison of biblical images of God’s body and practices around that body with the culture of bodybuilding, including posing, steroids, and hypermasculinity in the face of drug-induced androgyny (see esp. 87-102, 108-38, but also the rest of the second section of the book).

³⁵ Bynum, ‘Why All the Fuss’, 29.

investigations. Yet the present is also a product of what has been inherited, including discourses about bodies.³⁶ Nothing that I write is free from the web of concerns which have shaped thinking, nor from all the historic particularities and varieties of bodies which have existed.

2. Another category of theological work on the body is closely related to the first group in starting, generally, from doctrine (whether theological or critical/theoretical), but is distinguished from the first by purpose and motivation: this category is composed of investigations into the meaning of bodies which spring from justice issues, such as Liberation, Feminist, and Queer Theologies. From this standpoint, Douglas John Hall provides a good, succinct statement of what Christian theology is for, writing that ‘What is called for, in short, is a dynamic discipleship that combines realism about the awful discrepancy between the world as it is and as God intends it to be, with the confidence that it is realizable, and in part through our discipleship’.³⁷ The term ‘dynamic discipleship’ suggests an activist theology, stressing the role that Christians have in moving the world closer to what God intends. To move the world also means attending to justice for bodies and their relationships. Liberation Theologies focus on economic issues which are, of course, bodily determined, and seek to remedy the plight of the poor through a theological response to systematic sin in the world; many Feminist Theologies also focus on bodily issues, emphasising questions of gender and sexuality.³⁸ In any case, because these politically and social-justice oriented investigations ask particular questions of the body, prompted by their various emancipatory goals, they tend to focus on very particular aspects of corporeality. For

³⁶ Bynum, ‘Why All the Fuss’, 30.

³⁷ Hall 172.

³⁸ Feminist Theologies are often associated with struggles toward equality involving gender, seeking to undermine patriarchal systems. In *Sexism and God-Talk*, Rosemary Radford Ruether declares that ‘The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women’. The determination of the reference of the term ‘women’ involves discussions of biology, cultural stereotypes, social performance, desires and imaginations. For an example of Christian feminist theological discourse concerning gender, sexuality, and God, see Julie Clague, ‘The Christa: Symbolizing My Humanity and My Pain’, in which Clague points to artistic renderings of crucified women as actions subverting the androcentric assumption that ‘masculine’ is the default gender for human beings.

However, there are other ways of construing Feminist Theology which focus less on the goal of systematic justice (not that this disappears) and more on providing a platform for previously-unheard female voices to speak. For instance, the Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow critiques theology’s exclusion of women’s experience in “Male Theology and Women’s Experience” 42.

example, in his 1999 book, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., discusses the place of homosexual love and same-sex marriage in the body of Christ, raising issues which are currently controversial for church and society, but does not examine sexuality beyond the one specific question.³⁹

The aims of Queer Theologies, in particular, centre on interpretations of bodies and relationships, and appear close to what I attempt in attending to the plurality of stories of bodies. However, the presentation of Queer Theology in the collection *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* raises some questions about the fit. The editor, Gerard Loughlin, presents Christian theology as an exercise that ‘has always been a queer thing’.⁴⁰ God, the incarnation, the church, salvation: all are queer, set apart from what the world considers normal.⁴¹ Loughlin suggests that the collection pursues the idea that same-sex love’s legitimacy lies in the fact that Christian men have been falling for a male Saviour for two millennia.⁴² This rethinking of the western body seems remarkably bloodless, however. Little attention is paid to particular stories, comic or tragic, except in the first chapter, which tells the story of a theologian’s estrangement from her church and job when she came out as a lesbian; Loughlin’s introduction minimizes even this, saying that other contributors are more hopeful.⁴³ The introduction declares that ‘Queer seeks to outwit identity’ and that ‘Elizabeth Stuart’s chapter is programmatic’ for the book.⁴⁴ This chapter maintains that ‘At my death all that has been written on my body will be once again overwritten by my baptism’ so that ‘Gender, race, sexual orientation, family, nationality, and all other culturally constructed identities will not survive the grave’.⁴⁵ The vision for equality of sexualities thus

³⁹ The current Christian theological fixation with formal recognition of same-sex coupledness involves some interesting assumptions. Doctrinal deliberations concerning human sexuality that I have observed (in bodies of Presbyterian polity) move very quickly to debate over various aspects of homosexuality. For instance, at the 2009 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, a motion to restrict public statements concerning controversial aspects of human sexuality was assumed by most in attendance to refer mainly or even only to the issue of sexual orientation. Arguably, this demonstrates the ease that intimate matters of the body can cut to the heart, becoming proverbial lines in the sand.

⁴⁰ Gerard Loughlin, ‘Introduction: The End of Sex’, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* 7.

⁴¹ Loughlin, ‘End of Sex’, 7-10.

⁴² Loughlin, ‘End of Sex’, 5.

⁴³ Loughlin, ‘End of Sex’, 11.

⁴⁴ Loughlin, ‘End of Sex’, 9, 12.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Stuart, ‘Sacramental Flesh’, *Queer Theology*, 74.

presented really is the end of sex; all of the stories of the lived body, the narratives which create identity, get subsumed by the queerest story ever told, that of God with God's people. For this version of Queer Theology, the concentration on sex becomes a forgetting of the body, while my project seeks to do exactly the opposite.

Studies of the body from a social justice perspective do not have to focus exclusively on one aspect of the body, or diminish the variability of flesh. An example quite close to my own argument is Paula M. Cooley's *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis*, in which the central question is: 'What is the relation between an imagining subject and the body in the context of religious life and practices?'⁴⁶ Cooley examines the connection between bodies and people's imaginative employment of religion in the construction of their worlds, complete with values and meanings. She begins with a survey of relevant theory before working through her own hypotheses with attention to creative work, such as author Toni Morrison's and painter Frida Kahlo's.⁴⁷ The book focuses on women's bodies and feminist theory, probably because, as Cooley states, 'the cultural identification of "woman" with "body" requires that any discussion of the relation between the imagination and the body acknowledge the necessity for analysis and critique on the basis of gender difference'.⁴⁸ Cooley concludes 'that the body serves as a compelling moral and religious authority to claims for justice'; she posits that the 'relationship between a "bodied," imagining subject and the body imagined...is one of mapping', where a person charts on and through her flesh the many levels of reality she encounters and imagines while interacting with herself, other people, and the world.⁴⁹ The body becomes the place where human values materialise. Cooley's approach and mine are very similar in that both appeal to artistic making to analyse the body. Still, the projects are not the same. The difference lies in Cooley's focus on symbolic systems, and the body's construction as an expression of those systems: my thesis focuses less on systems and the relationship between the imagination and the body *per se*, and more on the relationship between bodies, plural, as seen in the imaginative worlds our stories create. But from Cooley I learn that there are multiple inflections of body and imagination involved in the complex of identities

⁴⁶ Cooley 109.

⁴⁷ See Cooley 9-10, for her overview of the book.

⁴⁸ Cooley 38.

⁴⁹ Cooley 112, 119-21.

composing any person, visible in the body ‘as [an] artifact’ of human efforts to map one’s position in relation to others.

3. Other theologians attempt to rescue the body’s image and value for theology, which has, in James B. Nelson’s words, ‘mistrusted, feared, and discounted our bodies’.⁵⁰ Nelson’s *Body Theology* is a good example of this. In the preface, he defines the approach that he follows as ‘doing theology in such a way that we take our body experiences seriously as occasions of revelation’.⁵¹ Nelson’s book reflects many of the usual locations for theological discussions of the body: sexuality, gender (for Nelson, men’s) issues, and medical issues.⁵² His analysis follows the usual tropes of theological investigations of the body: saying that ‘We do not just *have* bodies, we *are* bodies’; taking issue with the mind/body dualism of Descartes and his mechanistic portrayal of the body; and calling upon Christians ‘to move into the deeper meanings of our body and sexual experience’.⁵³ This approach treats the body and its experiences as a source for theology, a route for learning about God. ‘Body theology begins with the concrete’, Nelson writes, in order to become ‘critical reflection on our bodily experience as a fundamental realm of the experience of God’.⁵⁴ He describes bodies as ‘words’ that ‘In Christ...are redefined as body words of love’ in order to ‘speak of God to us, and of us to God’.⁵⁵ The idea of the body communicating meaning is very similar to the method used by many of the sociological and anthropological theorists: the body becomes a sign to be deciphered, which gives information about something other than the body. This is not necessarily something separate from the body—God may be said to ‘work through’ or ‘dwell in’ a person—but the approach takes the point of connection as a focus,

⁵⁰ Nelson 9.

⁵¹ Nelson 9.

⁵² The first three parts of *Body Theology* correspond to these divisions; the last part consists of sermons given as the book’s conclusion.

⁵³ Nelson 43 (*italics in original*), 49-50, 53.

⁵⁴ Nelson 42, 43.

⁵⁵ Nelson 52, 53. Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* takes a similar hermeneutical approach, reading bodies for signs of God (see 22). *Alien Sex* is particularly significant to my own project because of the interdisciplinary nature of both; however, Loughlin’s investigation differs from mine in that he takes the depiction of bodies in imaginative narratives as surfaces on which might be written signs of God, rather than seeing what the stories of bodies might show in themselves.

emphasising what can be accessed *through* that connection and so moving away from the particular body.⁵⁶

A recent trilogy of books by the theologian David Brown should be mentioned here, not only because the books fall into this category of interpreting the body as a source for theology, but also because their perspective is a broadly sacramental one and they seek an understanding of materiality through a wide range of creative arts.⁵⁷ While only one of the books specifically focuses on body, all three explore experiences which are enacted or known by or through the body, examples of matter manipulated or met by human beings. Brown looks at varied subjects, such as pilgrimage, architecture, pop music, poetry, and drama. He declares that the trilogy is about ‘religious experience as mediated through culture and the arts’.⁵⁸ In short, Brown strives to demonstrate how the presence of the divine is transmitted ‘through the material universe’.⁵⁹ This includes the idea of God ‘speaking through’ bodies.⁶⁰ The books largely represent an apologetic exercise: Brown argues that, at one time, all of human life was viewed as an arena for encountering the transcendent, but modern theology has increasingly restricted such encounters to specifically religious forms of experience; by looking at the communication of God through the physical world, Brown hopes to prompt a return to an attitude that refuses to bound God by the narrowly religious.⁶¹ It is at this point that Brown’s series differs from my own project. While it may be necessary to remind some Christian theologians that God is present throughout all of God’s creation, my interest lies in what may be said theologically about bodies themselves and their own story, and

⁵⁶ The drift away from particular bodies represents a tendency rather than a hard rule. A classic of this approach to the body and theology is Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I am my Body: A Theology of Embodiment*; this book is largely a theological manifesto, tracing what has been thought about the body and what possibilities could be embraced. Moltmann-Wendel concludes by sketching a ‘theology of embodiment’ which ‘seeks to give people once again the courage to use their senses...to stand by themselves and their experiences and accept themselves with their bodies, to love them, to trust them and their understanding, and to see themselves as children of this earth, indissolubly bound up with it’ (104). This is the suggestion of a project and a hope for others to take up; it is in the execution of such ideas that tendencies away from the particular may re-appear.

⁵⁷ The books are *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience*; *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary*; and *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama*.

⁵⁸ Brown, *Mystery in Words* 1.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Mystery in Words* 209-10.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Grace of Body* 11.

⁶¹ See Brown, *Enchantment of Place* 8-22.

the way sacraments point to the relationality of bodies. Though Brown's books also look at artistic works, they treat such works as instrumental to a specific way of thinking about God, rather than as valuable for their own sakes.

4. One final theological approach to comprehending the body focuses on the constellation of meanings around one particular body, that of Christ. For such studies, any discussion of bodies relates to Christ's body understood in any of three ways: the body of Jesus of Nazareth (in life, death or resurrection); a synonym for the Church; or, in the sacramental sense, as that in which one shares when one participates in the Eucharist.⁶² The second sense, of course, is the purview of ecclesiology; certain strands of Christian ethics and systematic theology also privilege the aggregate definition for organising the followers of Christ.⁶³ Several Christian theologians build their discussions of the Church as body of Christ around the sacramental figure of the body of Christ in the Eucharist, seeing the Church's liturgical sense of corporeality as emblematic or programmatic for the Church's actual action as an institution and community.⁶⁴ Concentrating on the social definition of 'body of Christ' lets such theologians emphasise the corporate, relational nature of Christian faith, reminding believers that following Christ does not involve an isolated bond between oneself and God, but also calls for companionship with other Christians (fellow members of the body of Christ) and with strangers (fellow children of God). However, it should also be noted that stressing the aggregate body of Christ carries perilous temptations, too: one might ignore the concrete realities of many churches for sight of the body as one Church, or lose sight of particular bodies and their stories, including both Jesus of

⁶² See Chauvet 139-40. See Samuel Wells, *God's Companions*, for an example of a study that looks at all three senses of the body of Christ.

⁶³ Christian ethicists and theologians following in the path of John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and William Willimon emphasise the formation of Christians to the shape of the body of Christ, the Church. See Chapter Two of this thesis for more on Hauerwas and bodies. Another group known for emphasizing the body of Christ is the so-called 'Radical Orthodoxy' movement associated with John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and (sometimes) Graham Ward; see John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* for a look at this group, and Chapter One of this thesis for a closer look at Graham Ward. At this point, it should also be noted that of all of my broad categories, this is probably the one most likely to overlap with others. For example, Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, is closely concerned with the body of Christ as well as a social justice approach.

⁶⁴ See Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, and Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, for examples of such theological projects.

Nazareth and the many individual bodies of the members of churches (not to mention what might be forgotten about non-Christians), all because any such aggregate body makes a much neater organisation of matter than individual, flesh-and-blood bodies tend to do.

Certainly, any mention of the body in the worship life of Christian communities tends to be of the body of Christ, and centres round the church and sacraments.⁶⁵ Still, Christian worship does involve concrete, physical bodies in their participation in the various rites and liturgical activities, as pointed out earlier in this introduction. Because of this, I locate investigations into liturgical rites and the celebration of sacraments as a subset of this ecclesiological focus on the body of Christ. Two specific works draw near to the subject and method of my thesis. First, there is Bridget Nichols's *Liturgical Hermeneutics: Interpreting Liturgical Rites in Performance*, an examination of the meaning of Anglican liturgy as discerned in both texts and their performance. Nichols turns to works of general hermeneutics by such thinkers as Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida to find principles instructive for a particular hermeneutics for liturgy.⁶⁶ She proclaims that her aim 'is to present bearings for finding and appropriating the world of the Kingdom through the experience of the liturgy, and this demands a habit of attention to the words and the actions of rites which nevertheless does not make them ends in themselves'.⁶⁷ Nichols's study is akin to mine in its attention to hermeneutics and to the form and context of liturgical rites; however, our aims differ. Nichols strives to interpret liturgy, whereas I strive for a hermeneutics based on sacramental theology as a method for interpreting the materiality of life.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ A quick look at any mainline denominational hymnal will show that there are very few references to any except Christ's. This is also true of many official doctrinal statements; for example, in *Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief*, one of the subordinate standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the word 'body' only appears in the statement concerning the Church's ministry as Christ's 'body on earth' (7.2.1, and similar usage in 7.2.2 and 8.2.6) and two references to bread as the body of Christ in Holy Communion (7.5.2 and 7.7.2).

⁶⁶ Bridget Nichols, *Liturgical Hermeneutics* 21-39.

⁶⁷ Nichols 46.

⁶⁸ Nichols makes an observation that probably should be essential to all liturgical study, and that is that what ends up being studied is an 'ideal liturgy' or 'ideal performance' of the liturgy follows the liturgical text as closely as possible without variation, error, or innovation, something unlikely in reality (46, 51). This is the question for a study of particular bodies: how can you reach a particular instance from the texts that you study?

Second, Regina M. Schwartz's book about the Eucharist in the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, and Herbert appears, with its move from discussion of theological ideas to examination of literature, to presage the form and method of my thesis. In *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World*, Schwartz argues that the sacramental mentality which theology stripped from the world at the Reformation reappeared in poetry; she declares that 'sacramental poetics' refers to an artistic sensibility in which 'Entering the world of the poem' means that one 'participates in its discoveries'.⁶⁹ The book brings this survey full circle, joining the liturgical, poetic body to the historical studies discussed above. When she is finished with her literary analysis, Schwartz even presents a similar view of the gift that sacramental thought might bestow: 'a particular that honors other particulars, one that opens out toward a potential universal without coercion', a movement across difference not by abolishing difference but by reconciliation.⁷⁰ Again, though, my thesis has some elements of contrast. The main difference is not literary era (I look at twentieth-century literature), but what Schwartz and I seek in the literature: Schwartz looks for poetic permutations of the Eucharist to show the sacramental nature of the art, I try to see what writers show about bodies because sacraments remind me not to forget the particularity of instances of materiality. But both of us wish to apply our hopes more widely than on the ground from which we start.

Bodies and This Text: An Overview of This Thesis

In the first part of my thesis, I examine work concerning embodiment from four different thinkers—three theologians and a philosopher with theological interests. All four strive to take the body seriously, though from quite different directions; however, I believe that, by the various theological choices that they make, they all end up at more or less the same place: obscuring, diminishing, or devaluing particular, concrete and physical bodies. Each chapter of the first part follows a similar pattern, starting with an attempt to discern what the thinker's writings say about the body, then moving to an analysis of problematic consequences of their position, and finally suggesting what can be built from their particular insights.

⁶⁹ Regina M. Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism* 7-8.

⁷⁰ Schwartz 140-1.

The first chapter examines the work of Graham Ward, focusing upon what he means by ‘the transcorporeality of the body’ and ‘the displaced body of Christ’. For Ward, the Pauline metaphor of church-as-body combined with the fraction of bread in the Eucharist takes centre stage; in order to minimise the exclusion of people based upon their difference from the majority, he places all bodies within the all-inclusive body of Christ. I contend that, although Ward provides an extremely robust, dynamic view of bodies, considering embodiment not in static, essential physicality but in action and relationship, his theology ultimately subsumes all bodies into one body, ignoring actual bodies and their stories. In response, I suggest that the robust relationality of Ward’s bodies could be retained as companionship with God rather than subsumption, to maintain the importance of particularity.

The second chapter examines the narrative Christian ethics of Stanley Hauerwas, who is concerned less specifically with bodies than with the stories that form bodies—namely the story of God in which, by taking part, a person is shaped as a member of the body of Christ. Hauerwas links lived bodies to the stories that they tell or, rather, to the stories which they learn to tell, the overall vision to which they mould their understanding of their own embodied actions. I argue that Hauerwas’s subordination of particular stories to one overall story diminishes the importance of the rich variety of individual stories; moreover, his notion of story devalues imagination, and turns its back on the non-Christian stranger. This chapter closes with suggestions that might recuperate Hauerwas’s connection of bodies to the narratives which they carry and which shape them. I posit that the problem with Hauerwas’s notions is a too-strong wish to maintain the orderliness of bodies when bodies are not very orderly at all, and that this could be remedied by a stronger account of the untidiness of flesh-and-blood bodies and the stories that they tell.

My observations concerning Hauerwas and Ward lead to the next two chapters of my thesis, one on Marcella Althaus-Reid and one on Paul Ricoeur. In the first of these, I explore how Althaus-Reid championed the unruliness of the body with what she called Indecent Theology, a synthesis of Liberation, Feminist, Postcolonial and Queer Theologies which strives to present all experiences of the human body, including sexuality, as resources for doing theology. In doing this, Althaus-Reid effectively provides an answer to the critiques which I levelled at Ward and Hauerwas, but not without producing similar problems in new ways. Although she turns against traditional theology’s failure to attend to the sexual body, looking for meaning in stories of

particular people and their untidy bodily relations, she does this by turning those stories and relationships into symbols and metaphors of what theology could and should do. I contend that this still obscures actual bodies in favour of abstract ideas of bodies. In response, I strive to uphold Althaus-Reid's critique of the absence of bodies-in-love from traditional theology, while asserting that theology does not only have to begin from those bodies, but also return to them.

The following chapter continues the challenge of looking for an adequate account of bodies and narratives by scanning the wide-ranging work of Ricoeur. I find that Ricoeur proposes a story-making body (rather than Hauerwas's story-formed one), constructing a narrative self which is opened to the world by the body and which actively arranges experience of life in the world through narrative. He gives human art great credit as part of the reconstruction of the world, from the linguistic level of metaphor to the social level of relationships. Yet, in spite of this, Ricoeur still obscures concrete, physical bodies behind a predilection for conceptual thought and a tendency towards the compartmentalisation of disciplines and genres which restricts the creative imagination of narratives to models and types. Nonetheless, at the end of the chapter, I suggest that a reading of Ricoeur which emphasises the openness of stories—the generation of new things which augment the world—could give a stronger account of the particularities of bodies.

The first part of the thesis concludes with a proposal of a method that takes the productive insights of the four thinkers into account, while alleviating some of the problems they generate. I base this idea on the work of feminist philosophers, particularly the standpoint epistemology formulated by such theorists as Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock, the notion of situated knowledges promoted by Donna Haraway, and the writings of Michèle Le Doeuff which attempt to keep in mind the incompleteness and partiality of the philosophical enterprise and the continued importance of the creative imagination. Put together, all of these conceptions of partial and situated knowledge provide a framework for upholding a multiplicity of voices from a plurality of bodies, for granting a high value to local understandings achieved through bodies in relationship, and to material life with all its contingency. This note of possibility also looks forward to the second part of the thesis, which explores the particularity of bodies as very locally imagined in the particular stories of creative fiction.

Each of the five chapters of the second part is a study of a different novel by a different author, focusing on a particular aspect of bodies that each novel underscores in some way. The form that a chapter takes depends upon its subject. While each of the five books deals in some fashion with making and art, as well as the imaginative construction of lives and history, the group is otherwise disparate. Of the authors, three are Canadian, one English, and one American; three are women, two are men; four are living. The books have quite different styles, and are set in different eras and parts of the world. The common denominator among the books is my own choosing of them. That I bring five disparate novels together follows Paul Ricoeur's notion of polysemy and metaphor. In his essay 'Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language', Ricoeur points to the way the multiple meanings attributed to any one word allow it to be more or less like and unlike another word. Metaphor, in bringing words and their semantic fields into relationship, plays off the multiple meanings in each word to create newly possible meanings.⁷¹ Expanding this idea to the whole narratives of texts—in my case, novels—one can put together any number of particular texts, arranged around an investigation into particular aspects of those texts, to find them interpreting one another under the attentive gaze of the reader. Of course, the result will be quite different from one particular collection of texts to another, but that is precisely the point in bringing forward the partiality of bodies and their stories—the approach implied by the discussion of feminist epistemologies with which I close the first part of the thesis.

The order in which I place the studies is based upon my own interpretations of the texts, following the aspect of bodies and their stories which I have discerned in each work. I have arranged the chapters so that the discussion in each builds slightly upon the last. Of course, this runs the risk that unintended meanings will be derived from the order, or that some other meaning might have been missed, but that is a general hermeneutical risk derived from emphasising partiality and the situated nature of knowledge, one that I contend is worth taking.⁷²

⁷¹ See Paul Ricoeur, 'Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language', *A Ricoeur Reader* 65-85.

⁷² The order of the studies does *not* mean to imply any order of value to their subjects themselves, or which book is best. This is especially important to note because the five books depict various religions: the first is largely Buddhist; the second includes Christian imagery, but is probably best characterised as secular; the third is quite specifically Jewish; and the fourth and fifth have particular relations to Christian theology. In light of the sacramental hermeneutics which this thesis proposes—that sacraments imply making room for others in the particularity of their bodies' stories and not absorbing them unbidden—the order is more than a little ironic, but it makes most sense out of the discussion of the various presentations of bodies that I have discerned.

The fifth chapter opens the section with a close reading of *Anil's Ghost*, by Michael Ondaatje, about a forensic anthropologist seeking the face of truth amidst the political unrest of Sri Lanka. I analyse moments of bodies in touch and the many ways that touch defines those bodies, focusing on Ondaatje's characterisation of the protagonists and the elements of the novel which interpret them. The chapter begins with a survey of the characters' various attempts to find meaning through what I call 'professional touch', the reading of bodies by archaeology, forensics, and medicine; I argue that Ondaatje subverts all of these with personal touch—messy and unpredictable, potentially destructive, but alive with possibility.

The next chapter explores the image of bodies as tactile maps in Jane Urquhart's novel, *A Map of Glass*. I note how the book unfolds the impact of bodies on the earth and one another, depicting the traces which mark bodies and map the world as a geography of intimacy. The discussion follows the lines made by bodies, first in helping people to construct their worlds, then through the fragility of the 'maps of glass'—their liability to shatter and, in shattering, cut—before reaching the point where I present the idea that this vulnerability in instability is also the location of creativity.

Fugitive Pieces, by Anne Michaels, is the subject of the seventh chapter. The book tells the tale of two men: the first is a poet who was the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust; the second is a child of Holocaust survivors, who tries to model his response to the trauma of history after the poet's life. I set the foundation for my examination of *Fugitive Pieces* by describing the book's poetic linking of body, earth, and history. Then I analyse the similarity between the novel's depiction of destructive and creative language and Elaine Scarry's understanding in *The Body in Pain*. This leads, finally, to a close study of the form of the novel with its two stories, suggesting that it is an exercise in addressing the body to remake the world.

In the eighth chapter, I examine *The Man on a Donkey*, H. F. M. Prescott's chronicle of the Pilgrimage of Grace, a Roman Catholic protest of the Reformation in northern England. The book follows five people with different statuses in society as they are caught up in the events around the nationalisation of the Church and dissolution of the monasteries; at the same time, though, Prescott counters their stories with that of Malle, a 'fool' who has visions of Christ. I examine the way the protagonists find their bodies claimed by different stories—social, religious, political, and the like—and are forced to negotiate these. I employ Ricoeur (again) to illuminate how bodies act as pivots between different ways of understanding time, and then argue that, even as

different stories threaten to fragment the body, the body in relationship with other bodies provides an opportunity to connect constructively and creatively the various stories which narrate life.

The idea of a narrated life leads to the last chapter of the second part, in which I read *Godric*, by Frederick Buechner. This is a fictionalised account of the life of an Anglo-Saxon saint, as told from the saint's point of view at the end of his life; his story reveals the narrative formation of a saintly body. I begin by talking about the narrated body as depicted in the novel, but move from there to a discussion of how this body is connected to Frederick Buechner's own self-narrative, as well as the reader's, ending with the implication of all three bodies—saint's, author's, and reader's—in the establishment of a plurality of identities.

Together, the five book studies, with their different views of bodies and stories, begin to map out meanings of bodies, charting relationships and proximities, pointing to the importance of the form of those bodies and relationships and the way their unruliness and unpredictability generates a ground of positive and negative possibility. This is, necessarily, only a beginning, one among many, and my investigations and readings of fiction can only provide a partial, situated view, a map based upon my own choices and the place where I stand. The realisation and admission of this incompleteness, then, implies that my understandings can never preclude those of others, that there is always another story available to be told, another location from which to hear those stories and see bodies. This implicitly becomes an invitation to collaboration, an admission that the quest for understanding, theological or otherwise, is a joint project of vision and revision.⁷³

This leads to the third and concluding part of the thesis, in which, by turning to liturgy and sacramental practice, I endeavour to demonstrate that a theological discourse can or even must be courageous enough to admit to itself the possibility of being unfinished: that is, I contend that liturgy is necessarily local and particular, and that this grants a means for discerning the body. I survey the work of liturgical theologians, starting with a focus on Gregory Dix, noting the tendency towards seeking a universal, ideal liturgy; I respond to this by looking at Gordon Lathrop's notion of the sacramental

⁷³ This relates to Michèle Le Doeuff's ideas of philosophy not as the realm of eminent philosophers who bestow wisdom on the world, but as a group project whose shape depends upon both agreement and disagreement, building upon what has come before it through acceptance or resistance. See *Hipparchia's Choice* 198-207. I discuss this further in the conclusion to the first part.

and liturgical system as a map which orients participants' understandings of the world, and modify this with a suggestion by Charles Winquist that theology's map of love, like that of any pair of lovers, is a map of particular values, of specific locations which are held dear. I argue that sacraments, therefore, help in discerning the body—or 'bodies'—by aiding in orienting people toward the particularities of themselves and others, and their relationship in the landscape of the world. In this, I attempt to bring together the various discussions of the first two parts of the thesis. If (a generous) partiality is to be considered important, this means that theologians ought to be encouraged to start from where they stand, to take account of those people who are around them in their specific location, to be open to the particularities of other bodies and their stories rather than simply abstracting principles from them. If the sacrament tethers the Christian theologian not only to the Word but also to the flesh, then there is no abstract liturgy, one should look at a particular instances of celebrating sacraments. Thus, this closing part includes a series of interludes consisting of reflections upon liturgy from The Presbyterian Church in Canada—my own denomination.

This localised theological project turns towards a geographical approach wherein the theologian does not try to exhaust a topic but to add to it, to be creative and show as much as possible the discovery that comes when things are seen from a slightly different angle. This approach begs for collegiality, for working in partnership and attending to other theology just as one calls people with their stories and bodies to attend to one another in passion and hospitality. Of course, there are dangers to this approach, mostly in the temptation to self-centredness, the refusal to listen to others except to hear what one wants to hear. Then bodies become things, objects for observation and manipulation, particular bodies in one's own particularly skewed world. But I believe the benefits of attending to concrete, physical, particular bodies, in the unruliness of their lived relationships, are yet of great importance—certainly if one wants to discern bodies as they actually are.

Clifford Geertz has written of place as often being invisible, treated mainly as a background on which values are situated. He states that

the invisibility of place has mainly to do with the fact that it is so difficult to free from subjectivities and occasions, immediate perceptions and instant cases. Like Love or Imagination, Place makes a poor abstraction. Separated from its materializations, it has little meaning.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Clifford Geertz, 'Afterword', *Senses of Place* 259.


The same could be said for the body, for bodies. This brings us back to Jesus on trial, the love-smitten man at the window, the occasion of Communion: all of these, and others, are instances of materiality, the lived body, moments of vitality and vulnerability that reveal the body. They are partial; they are incomplete; they are glimpses. But this allows their unruliness to speak for itself, as I hope this project and its various parts do also, even in their incompleteness, to form a tentative but concrete beginning.

Part One

Chapter One

Keeping the Word Flesh:
Attending to Graham Ward
and
the Problem of the Particularity of the Body

Christianity needs, then, to read the spiritual, the universal in such a way as not to denigrate or dissolve the historical and concrete. Discovering the eternal and unchanging within the particular and temporal is the axiomatic concern of Christology, incarnation and sacramentalism.¹

o writes Graham Ward in his book *Christ and Culture*, declaring the high value of the embodiment of human, creaturely being. By pointing to the importance of relationship and response, touch and sight, the permeability of the body and its social, historical nature, he strives to present the operation of God as the construction of embodiment: in physical bodies, social bodies, and the body of Christ. In doing this, Ward addresses what he perceives as the fragmenting tendencies of a contemporary culture that looks only at things as they are, at surfaces—a culture determined by scientific rationalism and unfulfillable desire. He hangs the value of the particular and the material upon the transcendent, reading creation analogically into the Creator: the world participates in God, is enfolded into God, and thus, materiality is given meaning. However, in so doing, Ward risks enacting the opposite of what he says Christianity needs to do. The creatureliness of humanity becomes simply a veil for the ultimately significant, a mere mediation of that hidden world which is more real, more valuable than the material.

Yes, Ward writes about passion, about suffering, and about vulnerability in relationship. He focuses upon bodily action and participation. In an interview, Ward has declared that

I want to come back always into bodily practices—because the heart of Christian theology concerns such practices. What are we doing with these bodies? How do these bodies change in the way that they are understood, the values that are given to them in different kinds of situations? You know, a body that is praying, a body in a hospital, a body making love—each of those positionings of the body reunite the body in some way with its value, and I want to get back that embodiment and its value.²

Such a statement shows that Ward attaches a high worth to the stories which are connected to and enacted through the body. He seems to want to maintain a principle that bodies and bodily practices can never be separated—that what you do physically defines your personhood.

¹ CC 243.

² Graham Ward, interview with Brandy Daniels.

His desire to address such a view of the body and humanity is, in my opinion, commendable. I would also agree that the attention which he gives to the body's passions is both strong and significant, and that it is quite right not to separate a body's meaning from the actions that it pursues. Yet, ultimately, Ward's care to safeguard the transcendence of God undercuts the wish he has to uphold the body. He sketches a theology of love that concentrates on the relationship between God and creation, leaving little room for the creature's love *with* God for fellow creatures, for the neighbour. This theology seeks cultural transformation through an erasure of creaturely differences, too easily forgetting the particular pains of particular people, which leads to diminishing love within the bounds of the world.

Instead of an analogical approach which organises the world into a hierarchy of value, I suggest that what is required is an account of embodied relationship that is founded upon particularity and does not separate the spiritual from the material. If we want to discern the body, we need an account of passion and desire that honours the creatureliness of human being, a passion that does not seek to inflict suffering on others, and a desire based upon the uniqueness of each person's relationship to the other as told in a plurality of stories.

Looking more closely at Graham Ward's construal of embodiment, materiality and transcendence, this chapter commences with a summary of what Ward seems to be trying to do—with the strengths of his examination of the relational nature of bodies, and with the problems that he addresses. I then turn to a critique of his reading of transcendence, exploring how this affects what he is striving to do. Finally, I build upon the implications of this to begin to make suggestions for a different way to take embodiment seriously.

Placing the Displaced Body: The Embodiment of Salvation

Graham Ward sketches out his theological concerns about bodies, Christ, and human communities in such books as *Cities of God* and *Christ and Culture*. In the introduction to the former, he identifies the task of theology as the discernment of where the world stands in the unfolding of the history of salvation.³ To connect what is happening in the world to the practice of theology, and all of this to what Christ has

³ CG 2-3.

done and is doing, Ward looks at relationships between different bodies. He wants to see how Christ is woven into creation, but also how we can read culture to point to the presence and place of Christ. Ward writes that ‘In reading the signs of the times we render perceptible the watermark of Christ within creation.’⁴ This is a hermeneutical theology of bodies: by interpreting the text of the world, we learn the story of God in relation to the world.

Moreover, all bodies interpret one another. For Ward, this interpretive relationship is enabled by the theological doctrine that human beings (incorporated flesh) are created. Towards the beginning of *Christ and culture*, he declares that

All the essays in this collection reflect this concern with being ‘made in the image of’; if we make enquiry into what a culture is we find that it is a system of symbols and practices involving symbols, a constellation of interrelated meanings that can only become meaningful—and be communicated and taught as meaningful—because they have material form. The character of the form is manifold: a gesture, an event, a word, a sign. But there can only be culture where there is figuring.⁵

Because we are made in an image, we make images.⁶ The images that we make include our own bodies—or include the way we see and interpret them in relation to those others around us and to our stories together. Relationship and negotiation stand as the keys to interpretation: the process of receiving meaning and making meaning in response never stops because our interaction with others and with the world remains dynamic. In another book, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, in which Ward outlines his theological methodology, he states that ‘the focus of [his] own theological project’ is ‘the negotiation between Christian living and thinking and the contemporary world’.⁷ This gives the sense both of a dialectical bargaining between two

⁴ CG 24.

⁵ CC 22.

⁶ Ward’s discussion here is reminiscent of writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote of notions such as ‘sub-creation’ in his essay ‘On Fairy-Stories’. When speaking of the recovery bestowed by the good news of grace and redemption, Tolkien writes that, for a human being, ‘So great is the bounty with which he [*sic*] has been treated that he may now, perhaps fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation’ (‘On Fairy-Stories’ 66). This ‘enrichment of creation’ through inventive and imaginative arts suggests that interpretation is not just communication of the meaning of existence but also adding to what already exists.

⁷ CTRP 4. Wending one’s way back and forth between Christian life and ‘the contemporary world’ would presumably be close to the way Ward might define contextual theology (he is Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics at the University of Manchester). Note how this formulates church and world as quite distinct entities.

sides and of a theology taking as its task the finding of a route within a jumbled landscape, picking a path among different realities while trying to hold them together. In *Christ and Culture*, Ward says that he is trying to see how in and through Christ ‘there is constructed a set of relations, a divine and dynamic operation that constitutes an embodiment (the body of Christ, the body of the Church, the sacramental body, the social body and the physical bodies of each of us)’.⁸ This statement exemplifies Ward’s concerns by demonstrating that, when he talks about bodies, he is talking about multiple ways of being incorporated: all of these different bodies co-exist because they are created by the relationships that people have, and that is the only way that they can be known.

Ward’s thought about bodies and the nature of corporeality starts with the vulnerability of the flesh, with a foundational notion that the form which bodies take is highly changeable because of interaction with other bodies. When considering bodies through the lens of the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, Ward declares that

Bodies here are frangible, permeable; not autonomous and self-defining, but sharing and being shared. When I give I give myself, even though what I give is flowers, a smile, a sweet word, an academic account such as this one.... Communication is embodied giving, and what I give is consumed by the others to whom I give. I touch upon their bodies by the presence of my own body heard and seen, smelt and sometimes tasted by them. The fluidity of time itself is the fluidity of identity. ‘This is my body. Take eat. This is my blood. Drink.’ The body is always in transit, is always being transferred. It is never there, as a commodity I can lay claim to or possess as mine. This is the ontological scandal announced by the Eucharistic phrase—bodies are never simply there (or here).⁹

If bodies are known only in relationship, their outlines can never be static, but always changing in the fluctuation of the borders between one and another. In this, Ward acknowledges that he follows Judith Butler’s idea that we know our bodies and the rest of the material world through the representations we make of materiality for ourselves.¹⁰ Such representation makes the body available as a sign (or collection of signs) which can be communicated; in turn, communication renders bodies ‘frangible’ and ‘permeable’: transferrable.

⁸ CC 22.

⁹ CG 91.

¹⁰ CG 82.

Ward systematises the theological relationships between bodies and their dependence upon one another with his idea of the displaced body of Christ.¹¹ To summarise this: Christ is always giving way for others. His body is malleable, becoming a medium for God's glory (think of the transfiguration).¹² The process of displacement continues through the crucifixion, the resurrection, and, ultimately, the ascension, which proclaims the total displacement of the body of Christ. With the absence of the physical, gendered body of Jesus of Nazareth, those called to become his disciples become Christ's body, making the church the next—perhaps even a fuller—step of the incarnation. The church *re-presents* this process with the Eucharist, when the broken body is distributed to individual members and then shared out into the world. Christ's body never stops being displaced, never stops being distributed, until Christ expands to hold all creation.¹³ In human beings, this process results in making possible what Ward calls an 'economy of response', which incorporates giving, receiving and replying.¹⁴ The acts of seeing and touching exemplify what Ward means by demonstrating the crossing of personal boundaries through intention and attention: perceiving a relationship with another, with one who cannot be you (or would not be experienced as other) but with whom you nevertheless desire to be connected.

Ward uses the concepts of the displacement of the body and relational response to address several of his concerns. First, he worries that modernity makes the body disappear, arguing that a non-theological account of the permeability of bodies is not actually about their changeability but about their dissolution in an 'eternal haemorrhaging' of the life-blood of the flesh.¹⁵ However, opposing 'the endless deferral and unquenchable grief for a lost body' stands the transcorporeal body proclaimed by Christian theology, a truly absent-yet-present body which generates hospitably inclusive community through eucharistic sharing, through expanding even while it is fractured.¹⁶

¹¹ See the chapter 'The Displaced Body of Christ', CG 97-116.

¹² CG 99-102.

¹³ CG 103-14.

¹⁴ See particularly the first part of CC 27-110.

¹⁵ CG 94.

¹⁶ CG 94-6. It is not easy to see the difference between Ward's presentation of a body which is acceptably (theologically) frangible and what he decries, the endlessly dispersed body pronounced by postmodern critics of modernity. Why could you not consider that dispersion an expansion as well?

Second, but following from this, Ward is troubled by the effect of the disappearance of the physical body on the social body of humanity. He finds that, not only does the endless deferral of materiality dissolve concrete community life, it also replaces communities which have a 'desire for the good' with 'virtual or imaginary communities' which are 'libidinal', where 'eros is read as a purely human drive'.¹⁷ He essentially argues that 'community' is a misnomer for these replacement groups; they are collections of self-centred individuals who seek only to fulfil their own desire for pleasure. The metaphor which he provides for such society is the sex shop, which conveys 'the conviction that sexuality is the most profound and inner sanctum of human experience'.¹⁸ Cyberspace represents the end product of these substitutes for the communities of disappeared bodies where everything exists at a remove from the physical and cooperates with a desire for physical pleasure that can never be assuaged.¹⁹ But while he sees this modern construal of the world as paradigmatically isolating, Ward points to Christ and the distribution of Christ's body in the Eucharist as maintaining a connectedness between fragments of life within concrete community. He declares that theology (and only theology) can redeem cyberspace by using the communicative power of the internet to subvert it, maintaining the materiality of human life by preaching 'a transcendent order' in which the displaced body of Christ can include everyone and establish 'judgements about what is true, good, beautiful, and just'.²⁰

At the same time, the continuing displacement of Christ's body constitutes a 'deferral of identity' so that the followers of Christ never stand still as a body themselves, but always grow to contain other bodies.²¹ The relationality of the body ensures that notions of Christ are not reduced to the determination of biology but can accept the whole range of human sexual orientation; that is, the ascended Christ

Or, what stops Ward's Christian formulation from also being an endless dispersion into nothingness? It seems that the only answer is faith.

¹⁷ CG 118.

¹⁸ CG 120.

¹⁹ CG 149-50, 249-54.

²⁰ CG 254.

²¹ CG 112-4.

becomes multi-gendered and thus generative of an all-inclusive body.²² This attempts to safeguard the opening of a place for all people in the kingdom of God, regardless of their personal corporeal identity in terms of ethnicity, gender, or class. The different ways of being incorporated combine with the inclusivity of Christ to work the transformation of culture towards salvation. Ward writes that ‘because the boundaries between physical bodies, civic bodies, social bodies, sacramental bodies and the body of Christ are fluid (and therefore vulnerable one to another), then practices of hope move in and through one body affecting all the others’.²³ Thus the displaced body of Christ changes the world.

Overall, throughout Ward’s theological writings, the materiality of human life has immense value as the location of transformation and redemption. In the construal which he gives, that importance depends upon relationship with the transcendent, or, to put it another way, the significance of the physical body filters down from the God who created the physical world, and can only be apprehended through a faithful understanding of that relationship. At times, Ward makes his point by turning expected terminology around; for instance, he writes that ‘The ensoulment of the body means that the more profound the participation in the divine, the more intensely the body becomes what it is’.²⁴ This replacement of the more usual ‘embodiment of the soul’ emphasises the significance of the body in God’s redemptive divinisation of humanity. Indeed, this suggests that the body’s value is a given, and that the focus should turn towards what the body does. Ward specifically notes the importance of the sense of touch, and how the drive and desire for contact forms the impetus towards community; with this, the body becomes central to the ecclesial community because that community is driven by a desire of the touch of Christ as enfleshed in its members.²⁵

²² See the chapter ‘Divinity and Sexual Difference’, CC 129-158.

²³ CTRP 170.

²⁴ Graham Ward, ‘The Beauty of God’, *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* 60.

²⁵ CC 107.

A Critique: The Disappearance of Particularities

To a great extent, Ward's theology projects the body in flesh, bone and blood as a foundational principle of doing theology. However, the emphasis that he places on embodied life in creation is jarred out of place by the analogical foundation that he uses: when Ward makes particularity depend upon universality and materiality depend upon transcendence, instead of maintaining a connection between body and spirit he actually maintains their separation within a hierarchy. In *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, Ward writes that 'The incarnation testifies to the subsumption of the human by the divine'; that 'social activity' is 'legitimate[d] by referring the local action to what is "ultimately significant"'; that 'the local and contingent is vouchsafed only in the name of the universal and eternal'.²⁶ The material is important, but only insofar as it is connected to that which is beyond the material. In *Christ and Culture*, Ward states that 'Just as salvation is a matter of the body and the soul, so revelation *is* story, our story within God's own story', and that 'The world is an allegory of love to be interpreted by love'.²⁷ Bodies and the narratives that define them allegorically represent something else, something better.

One could argue that I am simply finding fault with Ward's use of language. What does it matter if Ward hints that the 'desire for sexual gratification' is 'the crudest form' of desire, or that he opposes 'the eternity of conviction' to 'the contingency of orgasm'?²⁸ You might say that these are just figures of speech; however, they betray a constant devaluing of physical sensation. In other words, although Ward grants great theological value to the body, one must look at what *type* of body he is talking about. In *Cities of God*, the permeability of bodies finds its true home in the Church (which Ward labels 'the erotic community') while, as mentioned earlier, the metaphor for dysfunctional worldly desire is the sex shop.²⁹ In *Christ and Culture*, there are

²⁶ CTRP 58, 15, 173.

²⁷ CC 242, 189.

²⁸ CG 76; CC 110.

²⁹ For the church as an erotic community, see the chapters 'The Church as the erotic community' and 'The erotics of redemption', CC 152-81 and 182-202.

metaphorical bodies—at least, there are bodies whose actions together turn out to be figures for a different relationship: Ward writes that ‘sexual union becomes a metaphorical act of the relation to Christ’ and that ‘the erotic relation to Christ is the completion or perfection of what is most desired in sexual intimacy; sexual intimacy being an intimation of the divine relation between God and human beings’.³⁰ In many different writings, bodies are always slipping away from localisations, specifically moving towards what can be called a universalisation in Christ. The reader finds a ‘multigendered body’, one which Christ is ‘absorbing into himself’, as well as bodies whose meaning is ‘ultimately ungraspable’ because they are ‘always in transit’ so that they have ‘no difference as such, only distances and affinities occurring across networks of relation’.³¹ Ward lays the emphasis in such places on what I would call the eschatological body: a corporeality shaped by perfection in the risen, ascended Christ, viewing what the body is like now through the lens of what that body will become as a member of the Church, the body of Christ. From Church versus sex shop to this eschatological formulation, all of these bodies demonstrate a tendency towards a distrust of concrete bodily limitations. They yearn towards the neat and tidy, while messier (and, to some, less savoury) aspects of the body and sexuality—such as the culture of the sex shop, or physical intimacy—become either exaggerated into representations of the world’s corruption or downplayed to the point they threaten to slip from view.³² Ward presents an extremely spiritual view of bodies.

This spiritual view goes back to Ward’s theological locus in the displaced body of Christ. The same transcorporeality of Jesus which provides for the inclusion of all

³⁰ CC 109. This follows on from CG where Ward, at one point, defines the body as a ‘metaphor’ (95).

³¹ CG 113; CC, 106; ‘There Is No Sexual Difference’ 84. It should be noted that textual complexities concerning Ward’s bibliography complicate surveys of his writings. For instance, the chapter in *Queer Theology* is largely constructed from passages lifted verbatim from two chapters in CC: much of the first part comes from the fourth chapter, ‘Redemption: Between Reception and Response’, and much of the second from the following chapter, ‘Divinity and Sexual Difference’. While this can make it more difficult to see how the different pieces all fit together, it does make it easier to see where changes sharpen emphases; for instance, the title ‘There Is No Sexual Difference’ is much more explicit than ‘Divinity and Sexual Difference’, allowing a reader to surmise that a stronger desire on the part of the author in the later publication to make just the point of the title.

³² For example, in ‘There Is No Sexual Difference’, Ward declares that he does not ‘want to deny the role that having sexual organs plays in the performance of an explicit sexual encounter or the adrenalin rush that comes with stimulation’ (82). Yet, such compartmentalisation of physical intimacy into a medical realm of ‘adrenalin’ and ‘stimulation’ distances it from Ward’s theological and philosophical discussion, belittling it with an emphasis on its momentary nature without any sense that such moments could be linked together into an overall physical life of intimacy among persons.

possible types of people in salvation also makes bodies depend upon Jesus' body to an extreme degree. 'Within it,' Ward declares, 'all other bodies are situated and given their significance'.³³ While the characteristics of Jesus' body as shown in his life remain important, the Ascension becomes the key, for that is when Christ expands to contain the world. The attempt not to argue away difference and particularity but to include them actually eclipses them. Thus, Ward declares a question such as 'Can a male saviour save women?' to be essentially illogical because the transcorporeal Christ holds all genders.³⁴ The male, Jewish body of Jesus does not matter as much as the ascended multi-gendered, multi-ethnic body of Christ. The physical individual depends upon the social body and, as Ward makes explicit in *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 'The social is and can be social only insofar as it is constituted *in Christo*' so that 'From the Christian standpoint, there is no other body'.³⁵ This stems from a formulation of the doctrine of the incarnation which 'testifies to the subsumption of the human by the divine'.³⁶ Along with this, Ward's theology's 'ethical vision looks towards an end-times in which a realm is established where all creation finds its true goodness, beauty and justice by being enfolded into, rather than alienated from, the Godhead'.³⁷ The language of subsumption and enfolding, of 'no other body' and Christ expanding, while it may not erase the value of corporeal matter, does imply that particular embodiments are little more than stages on the way to something more valuable, and makes certain bodies—Christian ones—much more valuable than others.

The source of the problem lies in the hierarchical nature of embodiment's analogical participation in incarnation as Ward expounds it. He depicts the relationship between God and creatures, between Christ and Christ's followers as political, and while no relationship exists outside of social structure or polity, Ward's use of the word 'political' does not seem to question whether this has to mean that some have power

³³ CG 113.

³⁴ CG 113. The question comes from Rosemary Radford Ruether's 1981 book *To Change the World* 45-56. Ward returns to this issue with a similar conclusion in 'The Politics of Christ's Circumcision (and the Mystery of All Flesh)', CC, 159-80.

³⁵ CTRP 170.

³⁶ CTRP 58.

³⁷ CTRP 168.

over others. Ward analogically ‘confirms [hierarchies] as the order of things’.³⁸ But if the relationship between God and God’s creatures is construed as a hierarchy and relationships among human beings are meant to be analogical representations of that divine relationship, what follows is that some having power over others becomes theologically justifiable. As discussed earlier, Ward does take pains to make sure that such a hierarchy does not develop along gender lines, but there are many different relationships of power among many different groups or bodies. Not only is the language that he uses about the transcendent condescending towards the material, but his conception results in a reading of the oneness of all in Christ as having nothing to do with actual social equality.³⁹ Having the significance of the particular and material rely upon reference to the transcendent and universal allows Ward to note rather oddly that Christianity’s ethical vision speaks against ‘violent inequalities’ but not inequalities as such, for although all are equal before God ‘all are not equal with respect to the world’.⁴⁰ Ward apparently sees no violence inherent in this, suggesting that it is simply the way things are in creation.

No matter how you spiritualise this, the political and social consequences are disturbing in a number of ways. The emphasis on Christ expanding to contain the world leaves little room for negotiation with those outside the Christian faith—indeed, it does not seem even to recognise that these others exist, but rather to absorb them relentlessly regardless of their choice. Ward might protest that ‘As one body mapped onto the sacramental and ecclesial body, located in and as the body of Christ, this “expansion” is not concomitant with colonialism’.⁴¹ Unfortunately, a declaration that a theology does not represent violence in the name of Christian imperialism does not mean that this theology does not support a different type of violence—a kinder, gentler type akin to being hugged to death. Ward actually tries to be more open towards other faiths; he points to the reality of life in much of the developed world where people of many different traditions live together, and wants to leave the outcome of their meeting undetermined or, as an even better possibility, productive of a kinder and more just

³⁸ CC 88.

³⁹ CC 89.

⁴⁰ CTRP 168n.

⁴¹ CG 176.

society.⁴² However, the weight of his theological construction of christocentrism makes such openness difficult even for him to approach; in the introduction to *Christ and Culture*, Ward admits that he has ‘not engaged in the question of Christ with respect to our multi-faith culture’ because he is ‘not sure how to do this’.⁴³ Similarly, in *True Religion*, after expressing the hope that the interaction between various traditions which have returned ‘to an uncompromising assertion of faith’ might ‘redeem the spiritual materialisms of virtual reality or the omnivorous rule of global capitalism’, he finds himself faced by the terrorist attack on New York on 11 September 2001 and writes that ‘what I could not do was weave 11 September into my narrative *as if* I understood the part it played in the unfolding logic of “true religion”’.⁴⁴ The notion of one body of Christ saving all that is by expanding beyond physical constraints does not reconcile well with the particularities of bodies faithful to other traditions.

This leads to the second, related concern: that Ward presents an extremely agonistic view of politics in his hierarchical constructions. In *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, he argues that the present-day discourse of satisfaction depoliticises people, writing that

‘satisfaction’ means that you, I, they, we, he or she have nothing left to complain about. And yet it is the visibility of complaint, of contestation between standpoints, that is vital for cultural transformation to come about. It makes manifest the irreducibility of the imaginary and the symbolic institutions that it engenders.... In this making visible of complaint, antagonism or contestation lies not only a future for politics and democracy, but cultural transformation *tout court*. A culture of ‘satisfaction’ is a culture where aesthetics have become anaesthetics, because what it aims at is the erasure of desire: that is, stasis (or death).⁴⁵

The ideal politics—one which leads to cultural transformation and a vibrant society—derives its force from struggle, as persons holding to various standpoints work to persuade one another of their truth. The opposition between agonistic relations and control through placation leaves little space for any other political possibility, such as consensus, making the assumption that, if people are defined in relation to others, this

⁴² CG 256-60; *True Religion* 153. Note that in both of these cases, the sections in question come as the end of books as part of conclusions, and feel like the desire of an afterthought.

⁴³ CC 24-5.

⁴⁴ *True Religion* 153-4.

⁴⁵ CTRP 164.

must work out as a dyadic conflict with winners and losers. Such an understanding may be associated with a conception of an economy of redemption which pits the Church as the body of Christ against, and quite separate from, the world.⁴⁶ If Church and world are so distinct, but the ecclesial realm has saving autonomy, a politics of contestation would not seem to work, as the struggle is already decided. While Ward's competitive politics are supposed to lead to reconciliation and new social structures, they seem more likely to set a stage for division and endemic violence.

In the final chapter of *Christ and Culture*, Ward addresses the Christian mode of politics. He does so by connecting the incarnation and sacrificial suffering (as opposed to the suffering generated by sin). To Ward, the inherent connection between suffering and incarnation is 'figured' early in the story of Jesus with the 'wounding' that is his circumcision, and goes on to the Passion.⁴⁷ But suffering is not just a part of Christ's life, it is inextricably intertwined with the passionate kenosis with which God created the universe, 'primordial' and 'endemic' to incarnation—and hence embodiment.⁴⁸ There seems to be a linguistic confusion here which mistakes 'suffering' for that 'vulnerability' which comes with opening oneself to loving and being loved. Ward goes on to take issue with another theological response to the question of suffering, that of Jürgen Moltmann; Ward declares that Moltmann, taking suffering up into God's own history, 'radicalises God being with us, compromising God's transcendence'.⁴⁹ This reveals questions that Ward does not ask: why must God be considered 'transcendent'? What is it that God transcends, and why cannot that transcendence be compromised? The analogical relationship with Ward's transcendent God finally leads to an emphasis on the relationship of love, but only a part of love: the desire of God for human beings

⁴⁶ See the image of the Christian theologian standing at the door of the Church being depicted as facing out towards the world in CTRP 59. This makes explicit the separation of Church from world in a way that the Church does not really dialogue with the world but goes out to give order to life. See also Ward, 'The Academy, The Polis', for another use of the image of the theologian at the church door.

⁴⁷ CC 255. Something that does not seem to be observed is that such a prefiguring involving circumcision only works with this Christian body, for this emphasis on suffering and wounding is not the ritual point that has been enacted through countless generations of Jewish men.

⁴⁸ CC 261-3. In CTRP, Ward makes a point corollary to this, stating that 'It is not that Christians abide in the world and dream of its full restoration in Christ. Exactly the opposite: Christians, like Abraham, "sojourn in the land of promise", while suffering the contradiction between that promise and the surrounding foreignness. It is a suffering that is not borne passively but lived actively in labouring for the subjection of all that is distorted and sinful to the ethical, spiritual and political orders of that promise' (171). If life in the world is a 'foreignness' to be suffered, where does that leave the body?

⁴⁹ CC 259. Not, of course, that Jürgen Moltmann is beyond challenge.

and of human beings for God. The emphasis on hierarchy loses sight of human love one for another, and forgets that suffering cannot be easily explained away or justified.

Retrieving the Body in the Flesh

The way Ward construes the necessity of embodiment to depend upon the transcendent leaves much to be desired. While attempting to keep body and flesh at the heart of thinking about the relationship between God and humanity, this theology ends up stratifying the body, pushing actual physical attributes down to the lowest rung of value. The conception of the transcorporeal Christ to try to formulate a salvation with room for all results in a rather aggressive Christ who absorbs all into himself. The very agonistic view of politics and society which undergirds much of this not only promotes violence but also helps to generate an understanding that suffering is an inevitable part of incarnate life. Still, there is much that Ward says which is helpful, particularly the ideas of relational give-and-take, of touch, and of the necessity of passion. His discussion of the nature of intimacy, of a ‘difference-in-relation’ that is never static but ‘always under construction’, insightfully teaches readers not just about the vulnerability of the body but also of the part that vulnerability plays in relationships which, in turn, describe and inscribe our flesh.⁵⁰ The notion of the fluidity and instability of the body which Ward promotes also serves to help keep the body from being just a thing which can be possessed and manipulated, a thing separate from mind or soul which rules it—as long as other theological assumptions, such as the swallowing of the world by God, do not trump this as they seem to do for Ward.⁵¹

I want to hold onto the idea that it is through touch, through being vulnerable in relation to one another and passionate about another’s presence, that we are defined in our embodiment and construct the shape of our lives. But this bringing into being must

⁵⁰ CC 74.

⁵¹ See James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* 193-4, 257-9, and George Vandervelde, “‘This Is My Body’: The Eucharist as Privileged Theological Site”, *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition* 262-76, for commentary making similar observations concerning Ward’s conception of the body and the Church. Both take their criticisms in different directions than I do, however: Smith argues that the problem is not in the apparent subsumption of all people by the Church but in the lack of clear boundaries (so that a more precise definition of Church and world would be better, as if for a clearer idea of sides in the conflict, similar to Stanley Hauerwas—as will be seen in Chapter Two of this thesis); and Vandervelde questions the idea of the fluidity of body and gender from the point of view that it is the *person* of Jesus that matters most, not the *body*.

remain specific and local. Our bodies are constructed and known in relationship with other bodies. As touch is received and returned the world is explored: a new geography is generated. Yet, this is not a geography sketched out by placing the material *under* the transcendent. Rather than the vertical hierarchy of values depicted by Ward, this moves towards a more horizontal, relational ethos. This geography depends upon attending to the local and the specific. Forming at the meeting point of two people, it is a geography of love in which each partner pays attention to the particular story of the other.

In creation, God's vulnerability was and is to make us distinct from God and each other. Only in this difference can relationship exist and flourish. If there were no 'other', there would be no conversation, no touch, no meeting—nothing but the self, closed off and stagnant. Here finitude and even fragmentation are less a problem than a realisation of what it means to be human, to be creatures. We meet each other at and in our limits, not to get around them, not even to bemoan them, but to know them and perceive the world through them. In moving from Ward's view to this one, ideas of the transcendent and the material (or spiritual and physical) do not disappear; rather, the categories change. They become descriptions mapping the operations of creaturely life, so that being human and being created must include physical and spiritual elements. But even though there is more to everything than meets the eye, what is seen is not a lesser thing, not a reduction. The spirituality of the world resides in its very particularity, in the concrete and local; the specificity of things is created by God.

Any relationship between persons resides in this specificity of material existence. This does not mean that relationship is nothing but touch, for instance, but that the care one has for another is worked out in the particularities of bodies in all their awkwardness and hesitation, vulnerabilities and joys. In the meeting of bodies, people pay attention to the memories and hopes embodied in the flesh. In the tension between bodies, born of their difference, a relationship manifests creativity, the possibility for something new. In the sharing between bodies, persons give of themselves, becoming vulnerable to change; the touch of one body upon another can linger upon skin, thought, and memory, becoming part of who you are, even as you become part of someone else. This particularity to relationship makes of embodiment both fragility and strength. No one ever knows if one's offer of touch will be received with warmth or rebuffed, and the possibility of hurt always remains. Yet that vulnerability to pain also makes one liable to joy, the knowing of love in the turning toward the other.

Interestingly, Graham Ward himself provides some direction towards sources of thought supportive to a theological valuing of the concrete and the particular when he brings the standpoint epistemologies of feminist philosophers such as Sandra Harding into his analysis of culture and society in *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*.⁵² Standpoint theory began as a scientific methodology with the goal of making scientists aware that even attempts at political neutrality reflect a situational bias which is potentially oppressive; the epistemological approach works by starting consciously at a specific location (originally women's experience, but other locations also are possible) because every investigation of the universe is specifically located.⁵³ The greatest significance which Ward takes from standpoint theory has to do with its possibilities for constructing an understanding of identity. Because standpoints become known only through encounters with one another, any particular standpoint remains necessarily enmeshed with others; as any one person's attitude toward the world, or 'subject-position', may hold several standpoints, that subject-position may best be identified through the nodes where the various standpoints meet in a matrix generated by their implication with each other.⁵⁴ In addition, Ward derives support for his competitive view of politics from standpoint theory, where positions are not given, but must be 'achieved'.⁵⁵ However, standpoint theory and related philosophy does not necessarily stop there; the approach also can be seen to support an acknowledgement of the contingency of the material, including that of bodies, so that beginning from a specific location means recognising the limitations and partiality of knowledge not in the negative sense that this only cramps the pursuit of knowledge but in the more positive sense that partial knowledge grounded in the situated, the local, the concrete, and the particular can generate 'faithful knowledge' in creating a trust between distinct bodies.⁵⁶ This notion of faithful knowledge can stand alongside my proposal of a relational geography of love.

⁵² See the second chapter, particularly 73ff.

⁵³ Sandra Harding, 'Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate', FST 5-6.

⁵⁴ CTRP 77-80.

⁵⁵ CTRP 76.

⁵⁶ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', FST, 95.

Whoever might hold this approach would insist that personhood is made manifest in the stories that each person tells and that these stories cannot be reduced to any one pattern, but exist in tension with one another.⁵⁷ Rather than being allegories of formal categories predicated of the transcendent, the stories provide the content for our definitions of what is good, beautiful and just, for what is meant by faith, hope and love. When Ward uses standpoint theory to buttress formulations of identity, particularly leading up to a proclamation of the nature of Christian belief and practice, he also underlines the importance of a narrative understanding of the various descriptors by which an individual may be identified. After using himself as an example, he writes that

Identifications are affirmed by the observations of others—‘he really can’t drink malt whisky after nine in the evening’—the presence of others (family, friends, colleagues, passers-by) and the existence external to me of the institutions to which I belong. These external factors restrain not the stories I can tell about myself but the validity of the stories I can tell about myself. By ‘valid’ I mean that the truth contents of the story can be defended against any objections to the contrary. An alteration in these constraining external factors may affect what I can believe about myself and the way I have interpreted my experience; may demand a change to make my story more credible. Nevertheless, I am the protagonist of the narratives interlinking these sets of identifications and which generate my sense of what I hold to be true about my distinguishing tastes and myself.⁵⁸

Yet, the stories to which Ward refers here seem only as important as the truth contents that they hold. They are vehicles and mediations. In response to this, a stronger account of stories in plurality would go far to remedy many of the criticisms given above; that is, while Ward’s view of the fluidity of bodies and their relationships is insightful, a more-developed sense of narrative for all persons and not just for the second person of the Trinity might help to keep those fluid bodies from dissolving altogether or being absorbed in such a way that they lose their identities and their otherness as creatures from their Creator.

This world and the people in it are not shadows of something better, truer; our stories are not signs of something else. The goodness of materiality is not maintained by the transcendence of God but by God’s choice to care for the world, to be with created beings, to direct creatures to attend to one another with compassion—to be in company

⁵⁷ See the second part of this thesis for examples of ways this works out in literature.

⁵⁸ CTRP 78.

together. Rather than through a theology of analogy, human participation in the operation of God in this reading comes through a theology of companionship. The majesty of God, including the otherness of the Creator from creation, manifests itself in God being in relationship with God's creation. Love can never be solely a matter of God's love for us and our love for God. We are, instead, called to love one another with God—and love means attending to the needs and joys of each one you meet, even if that tending cannot be perfect or complete. God places us alongside one another in all of our particularity, specificity and singularity. This is an Emmanuel model of divine work—God-with-us—in which incarnation is not about the divine subsuming the human, but rather about accompaniment. If God, from the beginning, has looked outside of God-self, making space for that which is other than God, then God is not absent from the vulnerability of the concrete. God waits with us, attending to us, and calls us to wait with one another.

This relationship between God and human beings, and among human beings, remains a sacramental one, performed and enacted in the stories which we share. The relationship may be construed as specifically eucharistic, though the sacrament here does not focus on the breaking and distributing of bread alone, but on the entire action of making a space for the presence of the other. Indeed, with the words 'This is my body', Christ makes space for the particularity of bodies, manifested in their stories and their relationships. Our stories—the narratives of our bodies, including all our incorporated relationships, all the arrangements of our flesh—in their specific localities, and movements from place to place, then chart out the landscape of our existence. Indeed, our stories together recreate our topography and reorient the way we address the world. Our particularities, interacting with one another, generate the possibility of drawing out a geography of love in the company of God. Instead of suspending the material in the transcendent, the materiality of our stories set beside each other makes a grace to attend to one another, in suffering and in joy. With that in mind, I turn now to further discussion of narrative and embodiment.

Chapter Two

Keeping the Story Open:
Stanley Hauerwas
and
the Problem of the Plurality of Stories



t first glance, Stanley Hauerwas seems a strange person to set alongside Graham Ward to make a pair. Each presents very different tones in their writing, with Ward seeming gentler and Hauerwas more forceful, while the two theologians have, up to now, concentrated on different aspects of theological inquiry, with Ward exploring Christian issues around the notion of the body, and Hauerwas investigating the ethical implications of a narrative construction of Christian values and practices. Generally, Hauerwas is known for taking a strong view of the difference of the Christian community from the rest of the world and promoting the idea that the Church and its members are shaped by the story into which they have been gathered. Characteristically, in a recent interview, Hauerwas said that

Inclusivity is a way of forgetfulness. I often suggest that egalitarianism is the opium of the masses. This is simply because inclusivity is often nothing other than the direct attempt to eradicate difference. Therefore, I think that the presumption of inclusivity is exactly a way of preventing the conflicts we need to have in order to have healthy communities. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but I just think that's the way it works[....]tolerance and inclusivity are always strategies of the powerful.¹

These statements suggest that Hauerwas would see his work operating as the antithesis of much of Ward's theological formulations, particularly when Ward tries to bring people together into community by dissolving the importance of difference.² Hauerwas also seems to agree with the critique which I give above that Ward's theology too easily allows for the hegemony of a majority position while hiding the actual violence—gentle or not—done when overcoming difference is achieved at the expense of one group subsuming another into domination.

However, things are not quite that simple. The two theologians have more similar views than might first appear; note, for instance, that Hauerwas's conception of politics for 'healthy communities', as quoted above, requires 'conflicts' in the same way that Ward's does, as looked at in the last chapter. In fact, I would say that Hauerwas treats stories similar to the way Ward treats bodies; that is, although Hauerwas declares that theologians should take narrative seriously, in the end this means only a certain type of narrative and, more specifically, only one, governing story. His scheme more or

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, interview with Dan Rhodes.

² See the previous chapter, with reference to Ward's writings such as 'There is No Sexual Difference'.

less ignores the possibility that there is a multitude of stories. The Christian body which performs the Christian story does just that: performs a part that has been scripted already, embodying belief in practices which enact the tradition of the faith. This lack of consideration for the possibility of plurality even within Christianity—let alone other faith traditions—maintains a similar type of violence to that of Ward’s theology albeit in a different manner; Hauerwas’s violence diminishes the significance of the creative nature of humanity and constructs rigid walls around communities to keep their stories separate, all while he promulgates a militant sort of Christianity which exists in opposition to a worldly enemy.

In this chapter, I look at the place of the body within Hauerwas’s Christian ethics, a system in which Christians are formed through attention to the gospel narrative. After outlining the connection between embodiment and stories, I turn to a closer, more critical reading of the consequences of his theological formulations. This is followed by a reflection upon possible ways to address some of the problematic issues.

Hauerwas on narrative and stories

As a theologian and ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas has made the narrative character of the moral life one of the themes of his work.³ Hauerwas argues that the morality which directs any person comes less from precepts than from the stories which form the way they see the world. He writes that

The nature of Christian ethics is determined by the fact that Christian convictions take the form of a story, or perhaps better, a set of stories that constitutes a tradition, which in turn creates and forms a community. Christian ethics does not begin by emphasizing rules or principles, but by calling our attention to a narrative that tells of God’s dealing with creation....

Too often we assume the narrative character of Christian convictions is incidental to those convictions. Both believer and unbeliever are under the impression that narrative is a relatively unimportant moral category. Specifically, we tend to think of “stories” as illustrations of some deeper truth that we can and should learn to articulate in a non-narrative mode. Thus, when we are children we make do with stories, but when we grow up we want the literal truth—that is, the truth that can be substantiated apart from the story....

My contention is that the narrative mode is neither incidental nor accidental to Christian belief. There is no more fundamental way to talk

³ John Berkman, Introduction, HR 3.

of God than in a story. The fact that we come to know God through the recounting of the story of Israel and the life of Jesus is decisive for our truthful understanding of the kind of God we worship as well as the world in which we exist.⁴

By learning about God through stories, we learn our relationship to God. By learning our relationship to God, we learn about how we should relate to other people and the world.

Hauerwas talks about certain kind of storytelling, one that forms the teller and the hearer, creating character. This narrating of life, relating one event in time to another, is finally more prescriptive than descriptive. Hauerwas writes that

To be moral persons is to allow stories to be told through us so that our manifold activities gain a coherence that allows us to claim them for our own. Stories and character are interdependent in the sense that the moral life, if it is to be coherent, always has beginnings and endings.

Our character is constituted by the rules, metaphors, and stories that are combined to give a design or unity to the variety of things we must or must not do in our lives. If our lives are to be reflective and coherent our vision must be ordered around dominant metaphors or stories. Therefore it is crucial to our moral life to allow the metaphors that make up our vision to check and balance each other in terms of their appropriateness for the various demands of our life and the overall "life plan" that we live.⁵

Although narratives have high values for human beings, they are narratives for a particular end—they have the purpose of shaping our lives and the choices that we make. These are stories told ‘through’ us. In our interactions and the events of our lives we become the medium of a dominant story. For Hauerwas as a Christian theological ethicist, of course, the story that is being told is God's story as revealed by Christ Jesus. Christian life centres on ‘learning to live into the story of Christ’.⁶ We locate our own stories within the master story which God tells, and learn to see that history has a plot.

All of this seems a much better way to understand the world and human agency than simply attempting to rely upon a set of principles, for stories can flesh out such precepts as ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, helping to figure out what ‘love’, ‘neighbour’, and ‘yourself’ actually mean. The stories of Jesus of Nazareth in particular, but also other religious stories, embody what Christians are supposed to mean and how

⁴ PK 24-5.

⁵ Hauerwas, 'Visions, Stories, and Character', HR 168-9.

⁶ PK 95.

they are supposed to act when they say such words as ‘love’.⁷ Content cannot be divorced from form; not only does the form of what Jesus said matter—that is, whether a particular scriptural passage relating his words make up a parable or a commandment—but, also, the message that Jesus teaches does not exist apart from the way he lived his life. Thus, Hauerwas strives to take seriously the physical, temporal, this-worldly nature of the incarnate Word of God preached by the followers of Jesus.

That stories carry and embody the meanings of the gospel proclamation of Christ only forms one part of the equation; the other part relies upon the response to that proclamation, a reply which is worked by the Holy Spirit in those who hear the story. This second step involves the Spirit creating a new community, the Church, which must, in turn, live out what has been learned. Hauerwas writes that the Church ‘is constituted by word and sacrament, as the story we tell, the story we embody, must not only be told but enacted’.⁸ Just as stories embody meaning, the members of the Church and their actions embody those stories as a further living proclamation of the good news. Each body that is in the Church is called to become the image of the body of Christ, and each person does this insofar as she or he lives the way of life that has been modelled by the story of God’s relationship with Israel and the Church, the story from creation to incarnation to the end of all that is.

For Hauerwas, according to his writings, what this means is that physical bodies (of Christians) receive their place from the aggregate body of the Church. Portrayed as a part of the corporate body, the flesh-and-blood Christian stands against modernist individualism. In the article, ‘The Sanctified Body: Why Perfection Does Not Require a Self’, Hauerwas gives some grudging credit to postmodernism for criticising modernist views of the self, declaring that ‘The loss of the “self” and the increasing significance of the body, and in particular the body’s permeability, can help us rediscover holiness not as an individual achievement but as the work of the Holy Spirit building up the body of Christ’.⁹ In this, the body has a value different from the self because the body is caught

⁷ ‘Visions, Stories, and Character’, HR 168.

⁸ Hauerwas, ‘The Church as God’s New Language’, HR 149.

⁹ Hauerwas, ‘The Sanctified Body: Why Perfection Does Not Require a Self’, ST 78. Hauerwas’s praising of postmodernism is ‘grudging’ because he is not always a fan of the movement; for example, in the essay, ‘The Christian Difference, or Surviving Postmodernism’ in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* 144–61, Hauerwas criticises postmodernist theorists for the idea that there is no overall story that narrates our lives.

up in Christ's body, is a part of something larger which shapes (sanctifies) it, while the self represents the worldly tendency to separate from the divine and attempt to make one's way alone. Hauerwas goes on to declare the virtues of what he calls 'peasant Catholicism', an understanding of Christianity in which the faith is sustained through habitual practices more than through intellectual understanding, much like peasants produce what is needed for subsistence through bodily labour, knowledge of which is learned and passed down experientially.¹⁰ This shaping of the body 'in a manner that the worship of God is unavoidable' is set in opposition to our present-day world, in which we believe that we have the power to control our lives as 'the outcome of choices we have made'.¹¹ Hauerwas takes particular aim at Protestants who have an individualist ecclesiology, which he wants to counter with a Christian ethic which equates holiness with 'the discipline of the body'.¹² This usage of the word 'body' remains ambiguous, possibly referring to the community of believers and possibly to the single member: the lines blur, I would guess purposefully, in a demonstration of the latter's dependence upon the former. To discipline the body means to train both the member and the community in seeing each other as integrally connected.

The essay continues with reflections upon two books, Dale Martin's *The Corinthian Body* and Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Story Teller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. His reading of the first of these leads him to note that, for the apostle Paul, the main issue concerning the body was 'how our bodies are positioned for the upbuilding of the body of Christ'.¹³ Of the second book, an exploration of how illness and suffering focus attention on the body's reality, Hauerwas declares that, 'By suggesting that Frank's account might help us to imagine what it would mean for us to be in the Pauline sense the body of Christ, I am seeking to find the means to remind us that perfection is another name for submission'.¹⁴ In other words, the discipline of the body is the practice of submission to God. It is a practice that comes through a life of regular worship, a life

¹⁰ Hauerwas, 'Sanctified Body', ST 78-9.

¹¹ Hauerwas, 'Sanctified Body', ST 79.

¹² Hauerwas, 'Sanctified Body', ST 80.

¹³ Hauerwas, 'Sanctified Body', ST 83.

¹⁴ Hauerwas, 'Sanctified Body', ST 89.

learned liturgically, and especially, says Hauerwas, in the sacrament of the Eucharist.¹⁵ He writes that ‘our body’s story’ is ‘the story of our desire for God’.¹⁶ Hauerwas sets up a series of relationships and oppositions around the idea that practices follow narratives to flesh out the convictions at the core of our lives. Stories are embodied and lived, but there are two different kinds of life-stories: in one, the story matches the story that God wills for God’s creation; in the other, the story veers away from this narrative of salvation within community. The body’s story is the story of those shaped as members of the body of Christ together with others. The self is that which tries to tell its own tale, and ends up with a story with no order. The body, in this conception, outlines the location where people are oriented towards the kingdom of God, and makes no sense otherwise—a very serious place to put the body, indeed.

Yet, for all of this seriousness, Hauerwas seems only willing to go so far in his declaration of the value of stories and embodiment. Only certain stories and certain embodiments have value. These need to be looked at in turn.

On Truth and Fiction

In order to make narrative into a category which is useful for discerning moral action, he needs to find a way to judge between one story and another. He anchors his account of narrative’s worth in the truthfulness of any one narrative.¹⁷ Of course, very few people want to live by lies, and it seems unwise to ask theologians to accept untruthful stories as guides to how human beings should live. Yet, questions lurk beneath this. How do we know what is truthful? What exactly makes up a lie? What about fiction, or poetry: are they ‘lies’ or ‘untruthful’?

Part of the problem with Hauerwas’s formulation of the value of stories seems to be his rather low opinion of human nature, following a long-standing tendency in western Christian thought. In an early essay reflecting on the autobiography of Albert Speer, the ethicist writes that ‘To be is to be rooted in self-deception’ and ‘A true story could only be one powerful enough to check the endemic tendency towards self-

¹⁵ Hauerwas, ‘Sanctified Body’, ST 90.

¹⁶ Hauerwas, ‘Sanctified Body’, ST 90.

¹⁷ See Hauerwas, ‘Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses’, HR 112, one passage among many where Hauerwas connects ‘narrative’ with ‘truthful’.

deception—a tendency that inadequate stories cannot help but foster'.¹⁸ Apparently, a true story is one that shatters illusions or delusions about human nature. This is the closest that he seems to get to defining what he means by truthfulness. Truth is revelatory in the sense of uncovering what has been hidden, ignored, or denied. In the context of Albert Speer's version of his role in the architecture of Nazi Germany, it certainly makes sense to focus on the discernment of the truth. Yet, when it comes to truthful stories, nowhere does Hauerwas make a distinction among genres. That a narrative needs to be truthful seems for him a natural corollary of making narrative into a moral category.

One can discern this by looking at what Hauerwas does when he writes about fiction. Let us examine two examples, the first an essay reflecting upon Richard Adams' novel about rabbits, *Watership Down*, and the second his reading of the work of Anthony Trollope. In 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down*', Hauerwas looks for lessons concerning the essential value of stories in this story of rabbits with their own mythology seeking a new, safe, and stable home. He has a somewhat odd, instrumental approach to reading. He makes such declarations as 'Adams is trying to help us understand politics not only as it organizes people for particular ends, but also as it forms them to be inheritors and exemplifications of a tradition'.¹⁹ Even stranger, Hauerwas seems surprised in remarking on how the author of the book has structured the novel so that stories told by characters connect to events in the plot, stating that 'Adams seems to be suggesting that good communities not only know how to tell truthful stories truthfully, but also when to tell them'.²⁰ Not only does Hauerwas claim to know the author's intention, but he also implies that the purpose of the novel is to teach about political organization—all at the same time that he apparently forgets that it is a work of art, crafted by an author.

More importantly, near the end of his article Hauerwas sums up his own intentions. He writes:

I have reached the end of my tale (no pun intended) and some may feel that I have failed to make my case. But remember I have told the story of the rabbits only to illustrate and illuminate my ten theses for the reform

¹⁸ Stanley Hauerwas and David B. Burrell, 'Self-Deception and Autobiography: Reflections on Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*', HR 213.

¹⁹ Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down*', HR 174.

²⁰ Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community', HR 181n.

of Christian social ethics. The story was not meant to demonstrate that the theses must be accepted. That must await direct theological and philosophical arguments.²¹

Thus Hauerwas does to a novel what he says people should not do when approaching Christian moral truth: he calls the story an illustration of something that needs to be articulated in a non-narrative mode. In his practice, he turns the novel into an instrument of the point he wants to make which, ironically, is that stories are more than entertainment, and should not be neglected as embodiments of the identity of a community.

Hauerwas discusses Trollope's work in a book on theologically engaging with the present-day, secular world, declaring, 'I intend to show why novels, or at least novels like Austen's and Trollope's, are an irreplaceable resource for training in moral virtue'.²² Literature of a certain kind receives its justification, then, from its potential to teach a person, or 'to help us be good'.²³ Art has no purpose—or little useful purpose—beyond what it may instruct its audience, beyond its didactic quality. This goes beyond content even into the form of the book. Hauerwas notes that

the very reading of the novel is a moral training. By forcing our eyes from one word to the next, one paragraph to the next, we are stretched through a narrative world that gives us the skills to make something of our own lives. To make something of our own lives requires our being able to locate our story in an unfolding narrative so that we can go on.²⁴

Literature becomes a template for our personal histories, and stories become models for how we should live our lives. As the narrative *unfolds*, we are *enfolded* in it. This makes reading the steady, studied practice of mining a book for the skills that its words may impart to us for constructing our character. One presumably must weigh each book one encounters by what enlightening insights it may hold for our life's journey.

Although Hauerwas is attempting to attend to the temporal nature of our bodily existence by valuing narrative, by tying this value to morality he begins to choose which stories should be heard, while declaring that others would best be forgotten. He writes that

²¹ Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community', HR 198.

²² Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front* 31.

²³ Hauerwas, *Dispatches*, 53.

²⁴ Hauerwas, *Dispatches*, 55-6.

Even though moral principles are not sufficient in themselves for our moral existence, neither are stories sufficient if they do not generate principles that are morally significant. Principles without stories are subject to perverse interpretation (i.e., they can be used in immoral stories), but stories without principles will have no way of concretely specifying the actions and practices consistent with the general orientation expressed by the story.²⁵

Here stories are divided (moral/immoral, generating significantly moral principles or not) by the perception of their value. The problem with stories which do not generate significant principles is that there is no way then for the reader or hearer to find skills essential for living. This entire system leads to a number of conundrums, though. What is 'morally significant'? Who determines this? Should a story be judged by moral significance at all? Such questions must be raised with Hauerwas placing such a heavy burden on narratives for making meaning of our lives. The questions also arise from the fact that stories which are told for the sake of a community's identity need to be stories embraced as foundations by a group. If truthfulness is determined by the assent of a community, that community has to agree which stories should be dominant. The community then needs some way to determine how to judge the value of stories. For a Christian community, agreement over scriptures comes from the weight of tradition and canonicity, but the status of other texts remains decidedly murky, unless they, like lives which follow the narrative related by sacred text, also embody the message preached through that text.

Because of the community's centrality in judging the truthfulness of stories, one should not be surprised that Hauerwas views modernity with suspicion. He claims that "modernity" names the time that produces people who believe they should have no story except the story they chose when they had no story'.²⁶ Negativity towards the 'self' and attempts to create one's own life though one's own narratives has already been mentioned. Political liberalism receives a similar criticism from Hauerwas, who writes that 'Liberalism, in its many forms and versions, presupposes that society can be organized without any narrative that is commonly held to be true'.²⁷ Against the multiplication of individual stories and lack of agreement around one truthful narrative,

²⁵ Hauerwas, 'Visions, Stories, and Character', HR 170.

²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Narrative Turn: Thirty years later', PF 148.

²⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, 'Reforming Christian Social Ethics', HR, 114.

Hauerwas sets what he sees as the Christian way: that any one Christian person's story is only true inasmuch as it is located within the grander frame of God's story from creation to the eschaton. Your story, therefore, is only meant to be read as a part that is nested in God's.

This may be one way to emphasize the place of tradition in Christian discipleship, but it also has the curious effect of brushing aside the particularity of stories and the specificity of texts. As we have seen with his reading of fiction, Hauerwas finds value in a story when that story fits into his theological structure of morality or, rather, the value he finds in fiction comes from seeking a way for literature to support the overall story where he would locate the Christian moral life. But because stories are only important within God's story, he becomes suspicious of narrative theology, too. He muses that

Part of the difficulty with the rediscovery of the significance of narrative for theological reflection has been a too concentrated attention on texts qua texts. It is no doubt significant to rediscover the literary and narrative character of the texts of the Bible. But the emphasis on narrative can only result in scholarly narcissism if narrative texts are abstracted from the concrete people who acknowledge the authority of the Bible. Thus, I wrote a sermon in the hopes of reminding us that the emphasis on narrative is unintelligible abstracted from an ecclesial context. Indeed, I suspect the project to develop general hermeneutical theories by some theologians is an attempt to substitute a theory of interpretation for the church.²⁸

Narrative gets value in Christian theology from being with the story of Christ, and the only place where one can learn that story is within the church. While Hauerwas started as a great champion of the place of narrative in Christian life, he apparently decided to qualify this when he began to see that Christian narrative theology might be doing something very different, that theologians might start to see stories in their own right as something that human beings do.²⁹ He discusses two choices concerning narrative and theology: that theologians should attend to narrative because narrative is how human beings understand the world and our presence within time, or that theologians need to attend to narrative because Scripture has a narrative framework.³⁰ With the first choice,

²⁸ Hauerwas, 'The Church as God's New Language', HR 152.

²⁹ On the idea that we make because we are made, the position of writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien, see Chapter One, note 6.

³⁰ Concerning the first construal—on narrative identity—see the work of Paul Ricoeur, as discussed in Chapters Four and Eight of this thesis, as well as the reading of narrative identity in Chapter Nine.

investigating any narrative construction of the perception of reality means seeking an ontological insight into human nature. With the second, theologians examine the narrative nature of belief in order to re-describe for their audience the heart of text and tradition.³¹ Hauerwas thinks this is a false choice, that theologians do not need to extend narrative into the essence of human nature or to restrict it to being only a strategy of reading, ‘once we recognize that the church is crucial for the story that Christians have to tell’.³² But the tendency to collapse particular stories of particular people remains—they are collapsed into the Church.

The method by which Christians are patterned after the story of God told by the Church is problematic because of the limits that Hauerwas sets and the conception of God which he implies. His seems a very coercive God, who is author, scriptwriter, composer, and choreographer, while human beings are actors, performers, characters, and, at most, narrators.³³ In Hauerwas’s writings, there seems little place for human creativity or for a true participation in the work of God. This strongly safeguards the sovereignty of God, but it neglects Paul’s declaration that Christians are “joint heirs with Christ” in God’s work as well as Christ’s glory.³⁴ Hauerwas seems to fear the proliferation of stories, to feel that too many stories are distracting—though, to be fair, he is not really interested in stories, only in their traits.³⁵ The phrase he uses again and again is ‘the narrative character’ of Christian convictions, of the Bible, of our knowledge of God, of Christian ethics.³⁶ He demonstrates that God’s truth comes in the form of a story, and wants Christian life to conform to the traits of the narrative genre, but the nature of the idea of truthfulness to which he holds—and which, in a way, constitutes his method for determining the value in any instance of storytelling—does not dispute the so-called “natural” association of narrative with fiction, with the creation

³¹ Hauerwas, ‘The Church as God’s New Language’, HR 156-7.

³² Hauerwas, ‘The Church as God’s New Language’, HR 160.

³³ PK 25-6, 68, 106-8. Elsewhere, in ‘Going Forward by Looking Back’, ST 101, Hauerwas cites Alasdair MacIntyre, who wrote in *After Virtue* that we are at most ‘co-authors’ of our lives.

³⁴ Romans 8:17

³⁵ Hauerwas, ‘Narrative Turn’, PF, 149.

³⁶ PK 24-9, 62-3; ‘Narrative Turn’, PF, 139-40.

of fantasy worlds which are not real, which are merely “poetic.”³⁷ Imagination, then, is not creative but performative.

Granted, in his turn towards the idea of performing the faith, Hauerwas does admit to the place of improvisation. However, when he refers to a sermon by Rowan Williams on Christ bringing us into the dance of life, and giving us space to improvise alone and with others, Hauerwas only concludes that ‘our Beloved....has invited us to join with him in the grace of his movements, performing them just as he has taught us, so that we might awaken to a graceful performance that God is enacting in us and through us’.³⁸ There is little, if any, space for human art in this kingdom of God; the story-shaped body gets set in its course, and has little room for contributing to the remaking of the world in the repair of all that is.

On the Church’s Story-Shaped Bodies

Essentially, the story-shaped body to which Hauerwas points is a Christian body, a body whose only proper mode of being is sanctification. It is a body that belongs in and longs for the Church. While such a proclamation definitely has a place in Christian theology, the way Hauerwas makes the proclamation raises several issues in the way that it sidelines other types of narrative than that of the Church.

First, after reading Hauerwas concerning the body of Christ, you might wonder whose Christian body he is actually talking about. He refers to ‘the Church’ as if it is self-evident exactly what body of people he means. While he assures readers that he is talking about the Church as a particular community within the world—declaring that the Christian community has ‘budgets, buildings, parking lots, potluck dinners’ and more—this Church remains an idealised community; the insistence upon its actuality reads more as if to say *even though* this community is such an institution, what matters more is the ideal.³⁹ Because Hauerwas, for the most part, leaves aside the question of how any specific institutional church fits into the body of Christ, but still argues that there is a particular Christian narrative related by Scripture and tradition, he implies a unity of

³⁷ PK 25.

³⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, “Performing Faith: the Peaceable Rhetoric of God’s Church,” PF 109.

³⁹ PK 107. Theo Hobson points this idealisation out in ‘Against Hauerwas’ 304-5.

tradition that is historically difficult to see. Yet, if there is only one tradition by which the Christian body is to be shaped, then whose tradition is that, and who controls its definition? It seems that any specific Christian community, in either having trouble measuring up to the ideal or deliberately choosing a variant path, could be deemed outside the one true narrative, and that the bodies which make up that community would be excluded, too.⁴⁰

Second, ignoring multiplicity within the body of Christ extends outwards to non-Christian traditions. While Hauerwas does not deny that other faith traditions have narratives that shape their communities also, he does seem functionally to group these other traditions together with ‘the world’—with anything that is not Church. In one recent book, Hauerwas declares that

If the church is in fact a community determined by a counterstory to the story that we story ourselves, I have suggested the church cannot help but appear as a counterpolitics to the politics of the world. I am, therefore, accused of tempting Christians to withdraw from the world and abandon their responsibility to work for relative justice. I confess I often am tempted to withdraw, but there is no place to which we can withdraw. Christians are, after all, surrounded. However, we can in the meantime draw on God’s good patience to be a patient people in the world so that the world may know that the story goes on.⁴¹

Despite his flippancy, Hauerwas does not really challenge the accusation that he is a Christian isolationist; he is committed to the particularity of the Christian story. I do not want to challenge the particularity per se; however, the belief that the Church has a “counterstory” and is a “counterpolitics” suggests that the Church is, or is bringing into being, a “counter-world.” Although this other world seems to be founded upon worship—and the Eucharist especially—it would remain an *other* world, not the world that God has made and is making. I imagine that Hauerwas would probably deny going so far, and might point to his proposal as simply being a different way of being in the world. You could also say that Hauerwas’ notion of church, if it does not work for

⁴⁰ Linda Woodhead, in the essay, ‘Can Women Love Stanley Hauerwas?: Pursuing an Embodied Theology’, *Faithfulness and Fortitude* 176-85, raises the same issue of the flattening of plurality by Hauerwas’s theology, primarily from the point of view of feminism, but also noting his disaffection for Liberation Theology. Woodhead notes that it is perhaps easy for Hauerwas as a white, middle-class, male of the world’s most powerful nation to point to a monistic Christian narrative as the properly formative story because he does not really speak from the margins, and that his notion of a modern liberal individualism giving secular people (and church-people influenced by them) delusions of grandeur just does not fit for everyone.

⁴¹ Stanley Hauerwas, ‘The Narrative Turn’, PF 149.

justice in the world (his ‘relative justice’), follows the physicians’ dictum of ‘First, do no harm’. But instead of seeking the redemption of the world, this formulation of sacramental ethics seems to wish for the replacement of the world. It results in a strange tendency to ignore the existence of non-Christians except as the generic other. For Hauerwas, this manifests especially in interviews: in one, as a way of opposing a foreign policy which asks what is best for the United States, he suggests that the better question to ask is ‘What would be the common good of Christians in the United States being in unity with Christians in Basra?’—‘Christians’, not ‘people’, note—and in another, he says that, instead of participating in working toward a political regime which took care of the poor and the sick, Christians should just do such caring, and ‘the wider public’ might want to ‘copy’ the example.⁴² Bodies of ‘the wider public’ live in the shadows at the edge, and have no face.⁴³

Lastly, along with a politics which separates Church from world, Hauerwas’s ethics portrays a methodology of politics based on contest and antagonism. As much as

⁴² Hauerwas, ‘Learning Like a Christian’, and interview with Dan Rhodes.

⁴³ Hauerwas is by no means the only theologian whose focus on the Christian community and its formation produces a tendency to ignore the very present lives of others. It is, perhaps, a general problem affecting theologians heavily influenced by narrative theologies. For example, in an early work by Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story*, the theologian writes of ‘Salvation’ as ‘entry into the narrative space of the Church; passage through baptismal waters into a new country. It is beginning to speak a new language in the company of those who are called to be friends by one who does not desert his friends even though they desert him’ (220). While such a formulation gives a strong imaginative space for considering what the Church as a Christian community means, it neglects those whose stories are excluded, either by lack of recognition or by their own choice. Emphasising the Church as ‘a new country’ with its own ‘new language’ separates Christians from everyone else, running the risk of implying that other people—the citizens of that old country, speaking that old language—should be left behind; it masks the call to loving service.

One of the problems with the Church-as-new-language argument is a failure to follow through on the metaphor: it does not allow for much in the way of communication, as translation can only go in one direction. Those who find a home in the new language become superior to those based in the old ones because the latter cannot know the new language, but the former presumably retain knowledge of the old. This appears most strongly when Christian narrative theologians try to figure out what to do with Israel and Judaism. For example, Loughlin uses language such as ‘Israel precedes, whereas the Church proceeds from Christ as their common antitype’ (85) and ‘The Church is called to be the shape of Israel-fulfilled-in-Christ, finding its own fulfilment in continuing Christ’s story’ (86). While this leaves open the possibility that there can be an Israel-fulfilled-other-than-in-Christ, Loughlin does not make this explicit. Christian narrative theology may be meant to be an interior argument or ethic for the Church, but no theology can be that isolated, and surely such language must sound supersessionist to many Jews. Besides, interior or not, any theology helps to shape the approach that its audience takes towards life, and it is arguably dangerous to leave such language without a great deal of qualification.

But concern over the consistency and consequences of Christian narrative theology in relation to other traditions has been voiced by commentators from relatively early days in this approach to the discipline. See, for example, Michael Goldberg, ‘God, Action, and Narrative: Which Narrative? Which Action? Which God?’ *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones. Goldberg’s essay was originally published in 1988.

bodies are defined in relation to the community which shapes them, they are also defined in opposition to stories which that community deems false. The Christian social body and its members, as mentioned in the quote above, form a ‘counter-politics’ to the world. In his nature as a provocateur, Hauerwas has even written an essay entitled ‘No Enemy, No Christianity: Preaching between “Worlds”’, in which he makes the case that ‘the whole point of Christianity is to produce the right kind of enemies’ and that the main enemy is ‘the story of freedom’ as well as ‘the institutions that embody it’.⁴⁴ For an avowed pacifist, Hauerwas’s rhetoric is extremely militaristic, and his ethics calls for Christians to wage a war of persuasion. The body finds its form in struggle rather than collaboration; if bodies join together, it is against a common foe. Even intimate bodies—of people in love—seem shaped by what they struggle against: in the case of a married couple, the foe is a ‘sense of agency that underwrites the presumption that we should not be held responsible for decisions made when we did not know what we were doing’; that is, the lovers must shape themselves against the tendency to think that people embody the fulfilment of choice when they actually embody a community that lives ‘into a promise’.⁴⁵ The embodied life is a struggle against forces that would pull the body (the aggregate body of Christ and its representative, fractal member) apart. To Hauerwas, it seems, the body could be defined as an arena where one is formed to the life of God’s true community or not. All the rest, the unruliness of the flesh-and-blood body, the passion for the presence of another human being, falls away as unimportant.

Conclusion

As with Graham Ward, Stanley Hauerwas provides some enlightening insights concerning the body amid what is problematic. He notes that the body is shaped by its practices, with the whole of one’s life, not just the precepts of a person’s beliefs, being formative.⁴⁶ At the end of the first chapter, I suggested that the fluidity of the body that Ward pins on the transcorporeal Christ could use a stronger sense of narrative to anchor the body’s identity. This sense of narrative Hauerwas definitely supplies when he links

⁴⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, “No Enemy, No Christianity: Preaching between “Worlds””, ST 195 and 198.

⁴⁵ Hauerwas, ‘Going Forward by Looking Back’, ST 102.

⁴⁶ Remarkably, the performative aspect to Hauerwas’s ethics puts him far closer to Judith Butler than one suspects he might enjoy.


the formative practices of the body to the overarching story of God constructing a people for God's self and through them recreating the world into a kingdom of peace and joy. This narrative, which God calls the Church to tell and to live, certainly locates bodies, connecting any particular person to the community through cumulative practices which embody the narrative and, in turn, only have meaning under the auspices of the direction of the story's plot and form. The idea of a story-formed body fills the need for a theological account of how people relate to one another and not just to God: they share the same story and hence seek to follow the path of discipleship together.

However, the sense of narrative supplied by Hauerwas not only provides bodies with a location, it fixes them in place. Individual, particular bodies fill their roles and disappear, mainly because they are not as important as the overall story. What is important is the neatness of the shape of the body, inexorably marching from creation to the fulfilment of the kingdom of God, following the pattern of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Bodies are so fixed in their places that it is difficult even to conceptualise relationships which transgress the boundaries of the community's ideal. Even within the community, there is little sense of attending to another person's particular story as told by their particular body. There is little sense of collaborating with God in imagining and working towards the recreation of the world in a way that adds anything new.

The story-formed body and the transcorporeal one both need some additional help to keep particular, concrete bodies from disappearing. They need a way to break up the neatness of their shape, an account which recognises that bodies are not really tidy at all, but are messy, unruly, and not always discreet in their longings for the discrete other. They need an account which does not fail to see God and other persons in the untidiness of bodies and their stories. Thus, we turn now to Marcella Althaus-Reid and her *Indecent Theology*.

Chapter Three

The Indecent Body:
Marcella Althaus-Reid
and
Holding the Fleshly Life before the Theological
Mind

ot all theologians try to manage the unruly particularity of the body; neither do all theologies seek to discipline the incorrigibility of flesh. Marcella Althaus-Reid, for one, has sought to incorporate accounts of the material lives of human beings at what is perhaps those lives' most incorrigible level—the infinite variety of sexualities—into a theology she calls 'Indecent'. In her 2003 book, *The Queer God*, she writes that 'We are referring here to the body, but not just to anybody, because we want to refer to the body in love, which has been notoriously absent in theology'.¹ She continues on to discuss why she believes Christian theologians need to do this:

This highlighting of the 'ordinariness' of love and sexuality as done in a materialist theological framework belongs to the order of Others. This is an order of many people's everyday lives which gets lost when we do our arithmetic of the body in Christian theology, for instance, when recounting how many times the word 'body/ies' appears in theological discourse, such as the body of Christ, the body of the church and its tension with the academic theological body (as bodies in opposition). Dogmatics is the Christian *Corpus* (literally Christian Body; in Spanish it is *Cuerpo Dogmático*) which organises the divine body of knowledge that theologians have and the body of the community. Those bodies are organised, regulated, redeemed or condemned in a permanent theological discourse of bodies in loving relationships. However, as the Brazilian theologian Jaci Maraschin once suggested, these theological bodies have usually been bodies without flesh, without bones or brains, bodies without nervous systems or blood...and, we may add, bodies without menstruation or sweat or without malnutrition and bodies without sexual relationships....

In order to give some concreteness to the reflection on bodies in theology and to engage them in a dialogue within the framework of the discourse of a Liberation Materialist Theology we need to particularise these bodies. It is particularly important here to identify personal bodies by their names and stories and special characteristics of dissidence and adaptation in our contemporary history.²

In this, Althaus-Reid issues a clarion call for theologians to grapple with bodies in particular, as they are situated with the specific vulnerabilities of their flesh and blood and the specificity of their local lives, instead of in the abstract. She notes the bloodless orderings of bodies, the neatness sought in a systematic comprehension of bodily relations, and suggests that such theological organisation does not have enough anchoring it to the actual experience of the unique identities of human beings. She

¹ QG 113.

² QG 113-4.

proposes that Christian theology should turn around to base itself in encounters with actual bodies in love and the multiplicity of sexualities in evidence, giving not just a strictly harmonious reading but sounding the note of tensions between individuals and the way people's lives can come to include those tensions.

The intent behind the approach of Indecent Theology would make paying attention to particular bodies integral to what theology has to say to the world. Attempting by valuing difference to ensure marginal voices are heard obviates many of the concerns which I have already discussed, including the consequential absorption of many particular bodies into one in Ward's presentation of transcorporeality and the minimisation of creaturely collaboration with their Creator which comes from Hauerwas's notions of the formation of the body to the true Christian narrative. However, even though Althaus-Reid takes pains to explicate the shortcomings of both traditional and Liberation theologies where sexual and gendered bodies are concerned, using methodologies learned from Feminist, Postcolonial and Queer theologies, the results are strangely mixed. The writing keeps human bodies before the imaginations of readers, never failing to remind us of the specifically located nature of Althaus-Reid's theological sources—the people negotiating the political, religious and social realities of Latin America, where she grew up.³ But, in the process, those people and all of their idiosyncrasies often turn precisely into sources, placed at the service of theology. Bodies and their stories tend to become symbols, sometimes illustrations of what theology should be doing, but more often metaphors for how the discipline should be practised. The theologian who on one page complains that 'Over the dead bodies, the bodies of people who suffered and felt their life to be sometimes intolerable, theology was written' on another page writes that 'If Queer Theology is a body-grounded theology, that is, a theology based on the incorrigible, uneducated, libertine body, we may start by building a hermeneutical circle precisely from there, from that libertine, licentious and problematic body which refuses the Christian fixed exchange rate and makes of the redistribution of its own frontiers a precious thing'.⁴ The bodies in love do not become absent from the theology, they just become obscured (one might even say eclipsed) by the theological method that is derived analogically from their stories.

³ IT 1-2.

⁴ IT 27; QG 53-4.

This is not what Althaus-Reid sets out to do, and I feel more than a little reticent in my criticism of her work. As I have said, throughout her books, she constantly stops to remind us that theological systems ignore actual bodies at great peril. Yet, for all that she tries to do theology differently, it is as if the work is always being pushed towards treating bodies as metaphors, so that bodies and their stories represent some other reality—not an ontological but a methodological one. A person might wonder if there is just something inherent in the art of doing theology that skews thought away from particular lived lives; if even one who tries so hard cannot escape the trap, who can? Still, the attempt remains significant, and there are strategies for reading Althaus-Reid's work as a subversive, unsettling corrective which can find a theological route for bodies other than just one more systematising option. The particular stories continue to stand out, slipping from the grasp of any theological programme to construct their own way of seeing the world and providing a glimpse of that perspective.

This chapter explores the indecent bodies of Marcella Althaus-Reid's theology and what happens to their particular stories. First, I look at her critique of what she starts out calling 'North Atlantic theologies' but later 'T-Theology', with 'T' for 'traditional', meaning 'theology as ideology, that is, a totalitarian construction of what is considered as "the One and Only Theology" which does not admit discussion or challenges from different perspectives, especially in the area of sexual identity'.⁵ Along with discussion of her comments on the oppressive flaws of this ideological theology, I examine what she places against it, with more attention given to the details of how she puts forth sexual bodies. Second, I consider more carefully the movement past actual bodies which Althaus-Reid's theological method implies. Finally, I reflect upon strategies for helping the strengths of this theology to thrive in support of unruly, uncontainable bodies.

Critiquing Theology's Edifice of Lost Bodies

Marcella Althaus-Reid's principal works all include a strong element of deconstructive theology. While she aims this at 'T-Theology', in practice she concerns herself more precisely with the ways that various critical theologies have not been critical enough, specifically in the way they too often pay little attention to bodies and sex. Althaus-Reid looks most closely at Liberation Theology, arguing that the

⁵ IT 5; QG 172n4.

movement's underlying assumptions related to gender and sexual identities actually are holdovers from the dominant, ideological theology which it has always striven to oppose. In her view, Liberation theologians' failure to question heteronormativity has stifled their efforts to transform society and continued the marginalisation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and other people.⁶ Althaus-Reid does not mean to destroy Liberation Theology but rather to extend it, addressing further instances of systematic oppression by bringing sexuality into dialogue with political and economic issues through the embodied sexual stories of particular (namely Latin American) people.⁷ Lest one be left with the impression that Liberation Theology is the only culprit, Althaus-Reid also makes sure to point out where such other critical movements as Feminist Theologies make similar oversights.

Traditional theology becomes an easy target in that it needs bodies at so many levels but refuses to acknowledge the necessary presence of certain fleshly aspects of those bodies. 'Systematic Theology belongs to the order of Western Grand Narratives,' Althaus-Reid writes,

and although built in a make-believe dualistic opposition of mind and body, the curious thing is that Christian dogmatics is built upon bodily struggles. In dogmatics, bodies touch others, are slippery or loving or aggressive. For instance, Christianity is related to bodily functions (artificial insemination and the birth of Jesus-God, issues of control of sexuality, torture, hunger, death, and the return of the killed body in resurrection). It is also about bodily relations such as the dogma of the Trinity which is a reflection of the social understanding of what we can call a 'medieval family' pattern of hierarchical obsessions and Darwinian tensions, intrinsically male.⁸

Not only is this theological control of bodies criticised as blatantly sexist, but its foundation in bodily relations is noted to be strangely distanced by the way this sort of theology tells its narrative and uses its metaphors. Althaus-Reid remarks that 'Theology

⁶ Althaus-Reid refers to heteronormative theology as generating a 'God of imperial sex acts' who stratifies society, reinforces the patriarchal family and bolsters male power over women and all those deemed to be other (IT 91).

⁷ Althaus-Reid provides several autobiographical accounts for her criticism of Liberation Theology, which she calls her own 'theological stand' and the 'base' of her work (IT 5; see also the rest of the introduction to that book, pp. 1-9, and the introduction to FT/IT 1-9). She makes it quite clear that she is not against Liberation Theology *per se*, but believes that its hermeneutic of suspicion needs widening.

⁸ IT 18-9.

can see blood in wine but not blood in blood'.⁹ Such systematic theology can only see the concepts to which material items in the world refer; bodies are set in place by the strands which tie them to the theological ideal—organising them and making them decent—and then materially disappear.

The main problem Althaus-Reid has with Liberation Theology is that it does not bring enough of the lost body back. Women in particular are disembodied by theological discourse which focuses only on their poverty and not upon their desires.¹⁰ Althaus-Reid observes that Liberation theologians, while maintaining that God's preference is for the poor, render love (whether for other people or for a vocation) pretty much 'superfluous' for poor women, whose proper concern apparently should be subsistence.¹¹ She tells the story of the famous Liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, who, when asked to comment on women and the priesthood, said something 'along the lines that women in Latin America did not care about ordination, but about feeding their children'.¹² The dismantling of oppressive systems runs along quite narrow political lines, and does not seem to include matters related to the intimate nature of bodies. All of this has Althaus-Reid musing that 'a materialist theology such as Liberation Theology has been walking in the streets without noticing the life of the rebellious poor urban women who do not use underwear, and the richness of the metaphors for God, based on the interface between their sexuality and poverty'.¹³ She suggests that a theology that is supposed to be materialist rightly should and could spend more time attending to the embodiment of human sexuality and gender than it does.

Althaus-Reid's criticism of Feminist Theologies is similar, but even more pointed. She observes that, while Feminist Liberation Theology adds questions concerning gender to its hermeneutic of (political) suspicion, it has focused 'very rarely on sex as "having sex"', and so neglects a significant aspect of human life.¹⁴ Conceptual

⁹ QG 47.

¹⁰ IT 36.

¹¹ IT 139.

¹² IT 133.

¹³ IT 6.

¹⁴ IT 87.

bodies overshadow actual ones. This leads to several different ways of denying matter and the body. The attempt to move beyond gender politics can represent a distaste for materiality; connecting this to discussions of the resurrection, which she suggests could be read as a new beginning without the messiness of flesh and bone and bodily fluids, Althaus-Reid notes that any ‘quest for transcendence in Feminist Theology, even in the context of political theologies, is still a quest for an out-of-body experience of purity’ where ‘Purity contradicts materiality’.¹⁵ Another consequence is a tendency to atomise the body—especially the female body—by reifying those bodily functions which can seem the least corporeal; when feminist theologians privilege ‘the female gaze’, for instance, they are also choosing not to do a theology of ‘women's hands, legs, breasts or head’ but ‘a theology from a fragmented female body’.¹⁶ Althaus-Reid argues that, too often, the body is either ignored or controlled by a focus on those parts which can be deemed more transcendent or purer.

To Althaus-Reid, the usual method of doing theology, whether that be a traditional, systematic theology or a Liberation or Feminist theology, focuses upon organising the experience of the divine, making the in-breaking of the holy neat and tidy, something people can handle and understand. She writes that

Unfortunately for us in theology, when transcendence enters the scene, the body leaves. The body may remain of course at a symbolic level of exchange, but the real body, that is the body which speaks of the concreteness of hunger and pleasure, gets displaced.¹⁷

This ‘real body’ is too messy and unpredictable for theology, which finds this body in need of discipline, and one of the first theological moves for placing the unruly body in order is to elide differences within the human body and between bodies. As Althaus-Reid puts it, where the life of the body and sexuality are concerned, ‘The contradictions are many. Unfortunately, theology has become the art of erasing them’.¹⁸ The reach towards salvation—towards justice and peace, faith and hope, joy and love for all the

¹⁵ IT 103.

¹⁶ IT 37. In connection with this specific example, Althaus-Reid observes that women’s eyes are ‘the most innocuous’ body part, ‘the religious authorised spare parts of a woman in any patriarchal society’ and notes that decent women in Latin America are supposed to cast their eyes downwards in encounters with men; she judges the theology of the female gaze nothing more than another ‘boudoir theology’, ‘an authorised point of view’ (IT 38).

¹⁷ Althaus-Reid, ‘Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God’, *The Sexual Theologian* 99.

¹⁸ IT 45.

world—turns into a regime of fitting people (and bodies) into a limited number of categories. To do this, the theological treatment of human beings at the level of our bodies must find a way to deal with that incorrigibility of flesh and bone which refuses to be boxed up or pinned down; the thrust of Althaus-Reid's critique of the standard practice of theology is that the easiest way that it knows to deal with the body's excesses is to sanitise the body, to live at the symbolic level so that this purified body can point towards theological truth—and the price of this sanitisation is the loss of actual bodies. She charges tradition theology with wilful blindness and being violently reductive of reality.

Indecent Theology as a Reconstruction of the Theological Body

From critiquing theologies which lose the body, Althaus-Reid sets out to theologise differently. Her 'Indecent Theology' strives to bring the body back into theological sight, and has come under the umbrella of Queer Theologies, in which theologians 'introduced the body into theology, bodies in love, bodies entangled in ethics of passion—and transgressive bodies at that'.¹⁹ In such a move, the bodies and stories of real people, their infinite varieties of sexuality and their unique ways of constructing relationships, come to be seen as a proper field of discussion for theology, not through the imposition upon them of structures, but as subjects who can teach about the nature of ultimate meaning. Althaus-Reid declares that

We may say that language and the materiality of bodies constitute the matrix of theology which leaves traces, and to find a queer, strange God in Christian theology means that we can read a different and even unlawful theology in reverse. It is us, the strangers in Christianity, who now can write the traces of a strange God among us.²⁰

With this turn towards the strange, towards bodies at the margin, to write a theology of a God who loves from the margins, too, Althaus-Reid moves to a constructive theology. This sets the stage for her to champion the particular stories of particular persons.

¹⁹ QG 48. It is interesting to note that this labels the *bodies* involved in Queer Theologies as transgressive, rather than the practices which those bodies pursue; this perhaps reflects the way Queer Theologies rely upon readings of Judith Butler and the performativity of gender/sexuality (either agreeing or disagreeing): the performance defines the body.

²⁰ Althaus-Reid, 'Queer I Stand' 105.

It is from the unknown bodies at the social and religious margins that Althaus-Reid generates a theology of bodies in love. As this is 'a theology made from the different shapes that come from the encounter', the different types of bodies to which Althaus-Reid points become significant for the form of the theology.²¹ First and foremost, they are bodies which feel pleasure and desire as well as pain.²² The body's capacity for pleasure in meeting with other bodies underlines all the different types of bodies which Althaus-Reid discusses, and the infinite variety of ways that people can find pleasure leads to a theology which embraces bodies with an infinite variety of sexualities: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, heterosexual, and those who are uncertain. Yet the Indecent theologian's queering of the Christian tradition goes beyond and cuts across the usual categories, too. She introduces the 'libertine body', drawing upon both a history of bodies assembled to seek political liberation and bodies in relationships which continually recombine to generate a theology 'with its own built-in hermeneutics, a sexual hermeneutics which provides us with body-maps, with a cartography of wild dreams, of transgressive movements in search of radical breakthroughs in our ways of thinking'.²³ There is also the 'nomadic body' which never settles in a fixed location and is not produced in serenity but in wandering encounters with others; this body 'is the unsatisfied body in transit which carries with it oddities from the journey', 'which crosses borders between unnameable countries, and is given away by transversal kisses and re-configurations of desire' while 'searching for God's nipples and soft lips and trying to bite them in oblique ways in order to achieve some oblique transcendence in their lives'.²⁴ In addition, Althaus-Reid mentions the 'deterritorialised body' and the 'body without organs' (that is, 'without rules or codifications') which relate to the idea of 'a destabilised sexual body'.²⁵ What can be

²¹ Althaus-Reid, 'Queer I Stand' 104.

²² The importance of the pleasure associated with sex is another of those aspects of the body which Althaus-Reid notes as being ignored or denigrated by traditional theologies. In order to bring out the capacity of the body for pleasure, she describes the unadulterated nature of divine joy as pleasure, coining the term 'G(od) spot' from which she moves to thinking about our human ability to sense pleasure (IT 48).

²³ QG 30. The first part of this comes from 1970s' Argentina, when actions seeking greater liberty were labelled 'libertine' by opponents; the second part is derived from the writings of the Marquis de Sade. See QG 24-30.

²⁴ QG 49-50.

²⁵ QG 60, 67.

noticed from all of these is their transitory nature and circuitous approach. None of the types of bodies highlighted by Althaus-Reid remain static; they all shift constantly, either in terms of their location or liaisons with other bodies, so that the shapes which they generate are fluid. This tentative, open nature forms the heart of Indecent Theology's methodology; there is no closure, no fixing of boundaries—or, rather, these bodies have the ability to render boundaries permeable.²⁶ Because the theology is open-ended, the persons narrating their stories need not be fixed in circumscribed roles, sexual or otherwise. Instead, they may seek and teach ways to love in the flesh, travelling routes back and forth that cover the range of possible territory, transgressing boundaries which would separate people one from another.

The shape of these tentative and fluid bodies generates room for the uniqueness of individuals, and Althaus-Reid strives to bring back lost bodies by turning theological attention to actual people. In her writings, she specifically gives her ear to the indigenous women of Latin America, as well as people marginalised there because of their sexuality, hoping to learn strategies of theological resistance from their attempts to resist colonisation. Using these strategies, she turns to the reinterpretation of doctrine such as Christology. Althaus-Reid writes:

From the images of the Peruvian Coya women of Latin America, who do not wear underwear under their colourful skirts, comes the metaphor of a Latina, feminist approach to hermeneutics. Coya women kneel in the church mixing the odour of their sexuality with their prayers, while their babies sleep on their backs wrapped in an apron. The Coyas' sexuality, their children, their Christianity, and even the baskets of produce which they sell in the market accompany them when praying to Christ. And that is a starting point for a Christology done from women's bodies. The fact is that the christological process starts not with the first meetings of church councils but with the construction of the Christ, the Messiah, a process that depends on the interrelationship of a man called Jesus and a community of women, men and children.²⁷

This is a theology 'from below': Althaus-Reid seeks to move towards what God is doing from the experience of particular women in their religious devotion—moving from flesh to spirit rather than from spirit to flesh. In wanting to draft 'a Christology done from women's bodies', she presents a desire to bring the totality of the lives of these particular, indigenous South American women into the question of how one

²⁶ See IT 130; QG 79.

²⁷ Althaus-Reid, 'On Wearing Skirts without Underwear: Poor Women contesting Christ', FT/IT 83.

interprets the significance of Christ. This involves a dialectical ‘construction of the Christ’, moving between the very specific Jesus of Nazareth and any specific human community. In her view, the grounded nature of such theology addresses the situational needs of humanity more closely than traditional theology. The body becomes ‘the space of salvation’ and ‘Redemption is...a praxis of our past and a sexual praxis which accommodates the effects of the love life on people’s bodies’.²⁸

Where Have All the Bodies Gone Now?

The desire to work out of human particularity—to note what is irreducible about specific human bodies and the stories which they carry—demonstrates a belief that the local is an important part of being human; the hermeneutic here does not immediately erase the local in favour of the universal. Althaus-Reid seems to be sensitive to the differences of human beings; in fact, at one point she defines Indecent Theology as a ‘denunciation of sameness, while acknowledging identity formation as necessary’.²⁹ This represents a move to take the body seriously in what its sensual experiences can teach theologians. But this is where the problem lies: the bodies of these Coya women and other marginalised people are for teaching theologians and making theology, at least in the way Althaus-Reid constructs Indecent Theology. In the long passage quoted above, she declares that it is ‘from the images of’ these women that a hermeneutical ‘metaphor’ comes. The Christology is ‘*done from* women’s bodies’ (my emphasis). Somehow the bodies of these women have become resources, raw material for the construction of a better theology. This metaphorical turn appears throughout Althaus-Reid’s writing whenever she moves to reframe theology. The underwear-less lemon vendors of Buenos Aires become ‘a living metaphor for God, sexuality and the struggle in the streets’.³⁰ Bisexuality becomes a marker for ‘the theologian’s vocation’, a way of thinking theologically ‘irrespective of her chosen sexual identity’.³¹ All the body types mentioned above—the libertine, the nomadic, the deterritorialised—become

²⁸ IT 154; QG 133.

²⁹ IT 178.

³⁰ IT 4.

³¹ QG 16.

metaphorical sources for theological methodology. In such moves, the local and the particular are taken seriously, but only insofar as they can provide an improved general principle. The Coya women ‘who do not wear underwear’ become figures or ciphers as the theologian turns their images into metaphors, and places the metaphors into a new symbolic order; the actual women and their stories are less important to the scheme than the symbolic order is.

Instead of a companionable relationship among different human beings, the theological process becomes closer to the relationship between observer and observed. For instance, Althaus-Reid explains that ‘Indecent Christology is the outcome of critical action/reflection into the complex relations between women’s work and modes of production’.³² Yet, who is doing the reflection? This seems less an offer of hospitality for all people to join in theology’s work and more the utilisation of certain women as the theologian interprets them. And if their images are little more than tools for the improvement of theology, how far is this from forgetting the women in their reality at all? None of this is essentially different from the theological method which Althaus-Reid critiques, though her method uses new and different bodies for providing metaphors for the divine.

My objection to the theological process here does not mean that I believe what Althaus-Reid is trying to do is totally invalid. I sympathise greatly with the desire to reformulate theological doctrines so that they are not subservient to a patriarchal and colonial paradigm in which they contribute to shackling people instead of liberating them.³³ However, the tendency to turn people into symbols for the purpose of theology makes me wary. Even if this is for a sympathetic reason, the process treats people as material to be mined. In the last paragraph of a chapter contesting christologies, Althaus-Reid writes that ‘The point of critical reality is where poor women can end the Christian split between body and spirit in a drastic way, or God will continue to be thought of as a sort of “illusion of substance” or idealist starting point which feminists and post-colonialists alike have renounced together with the master’s authority’.³⁴ Is it the poor women who are ending the disastrous split, or is the theologian doing so from the symbol which she makes of those women? The Coya women appear at the

³² Althaus-Reid, ‘On Wearing Skirts without Underwear’, FT/IT 87.

³³ Althaus-Reid, ‘On Wearing Skirts without Underwear’, FT/IT 87-9.

³⁴ Althaus-Reid, ‘On Wearing Skirts without Underwear’, FT/IT 94.

beginning of the chapter and again at the end; they disappear among the forest of theory in between. At the end, they are said to inspire the process of Indecent Theology.³⁵ The line between attending to the presence of others and appropriating their experience seems to be very thin indeed.

In listing some of the characteristic traits of Queer Theologies, Althaus-Reid writes that

We start our reflections from our own sexual stories. We lift God's skirts after having lifted our own first. In lifting our skirts we remind ourselves of our own identity at the moment of doing theology while we remain committed to theological honesty. It is from an alliance of sexual epistemologies in disagreement with heterosexual ideology and not vice versa that we reflect on grace, redemption and salvation.³⁶

While this calls for people to maintain an awareness of human bodies and their stories, this is only the beginning. What is significant is the 'alliance of sexual epistemologies': we gain methods for determining how we know about relationship and move from them to our theological reflections. The peril here is that people can become nothing but illustrations for the theologian, figures who prop up the argument the theologian wants to make. Then there is no body but the image of a body. A dualism remains between body and spirit, between the material and the transcendent, not that the material depends upon the transcendent for its existence but that the material is used as a step towards finding what is transcendent—a better theological system. Once the local and specific is thus used, what happens to it? It is consumed, the means to the end of understanding.

That a theologian such as Marcella Althaus-Reid, who focuses so much on critiquing the way traditional theologies lose bodies, nevertheless so often turns people and their stories into methodological metaphors and signs is more than a little depressing. Must all theology deal in this 'symbolification' of human beings and their narratives? Althaus-Reid herself speaks of traditional theological method as a '*Chupadero*', a 'sucker', which absorbs all theological forays into itself, destroying attempts to be liberated in difference.³⁷ It seems that, for all her effort to the contrary, Althaus-Reid also succumbs to the force of this ideological cast of theology. Bodies

³⁵ Althaus-Reid, 'On Wearing Skirts without Underwear', FT/IT 94.

³⁶ Althaus-Reid, 'Queer I Stand' 107.

³⁷ IT 103. '*Chupadero*' was the name given to Argentinian interrogation centres and prisons during the time of the Military Junta in the nineteen-seventies.

become figures set against traditional theologies, but their flesh-and-blood unruliness fades away in the face of the new conceptual bodies which Indecent Theology and other Queer Theologies propose.

It might be argued that this critique assumes far too naive a reading of symbols and metaphors. According to this objection, the wariness about turning people into symbols disregards the sophistication of what Althaus-Reid is doing—that she is not obliterating bodies but overlaying them with symbols. To this point of view, the metaphors of Indecent Theology create new understandings of the world, adding to what is there rather than diminishing it. This is a strong objection. In part, theological discourse attends to symbols generating systems of meaning; in part, theology functions to organise symbols, enabling discussion of how experience relates to meaning, and to explore how metaphors destabilise and enliven those symbols. However, there is a difference between attaching symbols to people and turning people into symbols, and a difference between using new metaphors to extend theology's range and making the metaphor the most significant goal of theological reflection. If people are ever symbols, then they are very complex ones, always eluding final definition so that just when you think that you have figured out a person, another facet appears, another depth to that person's existence and character. According to Althaus-Reid, Queer Theologies (including Indecent Theology) resist too-easy definitions.³⁸ Yet, if in these theologies 'The different bodies of the people of God reflect precisely the multiple bodies of God in the Trinitarian kenosis of omnisexuality and the presence among us of polyamorus [sic] divine concerns', as Althaus-Reid proclaims, when do these bodies get the chance to reflect themselves?³⁹ As practised here, this theological move of extrapolation from the stories of people to the character of God moves dangerously close to treating people as things by making them tools for theologians. And, well-intentioned or not, you can far more easily manipulate a thing than you can a person, subject or agent.

Retaining Indecency: Althaus-Reid and a Possible Recombination of Bodies

I believe, however, that there are ways to construe Althaus-Reid's Indecent Theology which hold onto her insight that theology should include bodies in love, those

³⁸ Althaus-Reid, 'On Queer Theology and Liberation Theology' 95.

³⁹ QG 110.

actual bodies which do not fit the stereotypes of theological decency. Instead of a theology which mainly generates general principles of how to think about God and humanity metaphorically from the various ways that human beings relate sexually, the emphasis should be placed on the way Indecent Theology calls theologians to follow a path of ‘diversity, dis-order and justice’.⁴⁰ Instead of only starting from real bodies, lives and stories, this theology may be constructed as a way of reading, of seeing or listening to the world, which returns to these bodies as well. Creation and creatures shift from being the raw material for the production of theology to being theological subjects; that is, we all live theological lives as we are, as we relate to one another, and not just (or even primarily) as symbols which point to theological systems.

First, one can read the sexual stories to which Althaus-Reid refers not as symbols or generators of symbols but as parables which serve to unsettle theology and theologians. This gives primacy to the critical nature of Indecent Theology as it works to deconstruct the oppressive elements tied to traditional theological systems; bodies become provocations, their presence keeping theologians from getting too comfortable in organising the world. Because the marginalised bodies at the heart of Althaus-Reid’s writings do not fit neatly in any compartment, they disquiet even Indecent Theology, the language of their flesh and blood subverting the easiness of the methodological metaphors. Of course, this reading does not erase the tendency to move quickly from actual to conceptual bodies, and could itself concentrate so much on the parable that actual persons are forgotten again. But as practitioners of a critical theology following in the footsteps of Liberation Theology, Althaus-Reid does not forget to call upon Queer theologians to seek a theological praxis of compassion and service within the communities which are the sources of their metaphors.⁴¹ This turns Indecent Theology into a type of prolegomena which allows one to concentrate theologically on difference and particularity, and thus to bring back lost and forsaken bodies.

Second, one could spin off a return to bodies from what Althaus-Reid herself says in linking theologies (including Queer and Indecent ones) with fictions. She writes that

Expressing a fictional account, literature expresses and re-discovers truth which could not be expressed in real life in another way. So it is with

⁴⁰ Althaus-Reid, ‘Queer I Stand’ 109.

⁴¹ Althaus-Reid, ‘On Queer Theology and Liberation Theology’ 94.

theology: theology's main function is to be fictitious. It aims to lie in the sense that its mission is to express the inexpressible, the utopia of the Kingdom, the intuitions manifested in vague suspicions and intuitions of different orders in sacred and human society. That is the real meaning of the prophetic role of the church, understood in a critical way. Queer Theology, by basing its reflections in libertine epistemologies, rescues different forms of imagining love which exist among us and which may lead us to different and better understandings of God and life.⁴²

While this does not represent a fully-thought-out interdisciplinary account of literature and theology, the idea of literary manifestation of intuited possibilities could cut across the limitations of methodological systems—even if fiction is not always based on 'the inexpressible' or 'vague suspicions'. In this case, the imaginative power of both literature and theology could provide a route for bodies in all their fullness to be presented, and in their irreducibility to hamper any temptations towards flat, simplistic readings of persons and their stories. Imagination can help ensure that theologians do not turn bodies into things, moving people to take other people seriously: to listen to another's voice, and to attend to what another has to say in the making of the world.⁴³

Finally, alongside Althaus-Reid's metaphors, she continually points to the extravagances produced by bodies which refuse to be pinned down. *Indecent Theology* ends with a declaration of 'The excessiveness of our hungry lives: our hunger for food, hunger for the touch of other bodies, for love and for God; a multitude of hungers never satisfied which grow and expand and put us into risky situations and challenge, like a carnival of the poor, the textbooks of the normalisers of life'.⁴⁴ In *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, there is a chapter called 'Doing the Theology of Memory', where Althaus-Reid presents how a group of women in El Salvador dealt with atrocities against them by memorialising their experience as a community. The

⁴² QG 130. This idea of theology being 'fictitious' may be compared to Charles Winquist's notion of theology as a 'minor literature' (Winquist 127-37). Both see theology's literary function as acting against the grain of majority understandings and systems of thought. Particularly in *The Queer God*, Althaus-Reid points to works of literature as case studies from which she hones the sexual epistemologies and metaphors for theological method.

⁴³ As an example of this, the book *Fugitive Pieces*, by Anne Michaels, to a large extent tells the story of rescuing people from being turned into symbols even by those who love them, fleshing out memory to construct lives from the pieces that one finds (as discussed in more detail in the second part of this thesis). In her literary exploration of the tragic reverberations of the Holocaust, Michaels evokes what happened when ideologues turned Jews from human beings into *figuren*—into things (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996, 165-6). Admittedly, this is an extreme example, but it does show that theologians should always be wary of our contributions to how people are seen, how the other is construed, how stories are going to be read.

⁴⁴ IT 200.

memory of their stories became integral to the women understanding what happened to them and orienting their own stories so that they aligned not simply with tragedy but with hope in the telling. Althaus-Reid here gives first place to what she calls ‘a critical Theology of Memory done from the underside of history’ and seems to pay attention less to a metaphor she constructs from the image of people and more to what particular people have done with their stories.⁴⁵ Similarly, *The Queer God* ends with examples of activist strategies practised by various Queer communities, pointing to the ‘many forms of political and theological aspiration written from the body of the excluded’.⁴⁶ In such examples, Althaus-Reid suggests a very different hermeneutic than she does with her methodological metaphors—one where the other is allowed to be other, to offer and give, instead of being used.⁴⁷

All three of these strategies, taken together, may provide a way to focus on those parts of Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Indecent Theology* which privilege the incorrigible unruliness of particular bodies. What matter here is emphasis. The critical side of *Indecent Theology* concentrates on destabilising boundaries so that bodies become unbound. These liberated, fluid bodies are bodies in love, bodies made unstable by the desire to embrace and be embraced by others; in such passionate instability, each person’s everyday life of love, in the concreteness of joys and troubles, remains particular to them and their relationships. Unfortunately, the subversion of the boundaries of bodies can go too far: concrete, particular bodies can disappear into conceptual bodies when actual bodies are seen mainly as the starting point for producing a set of symbols to govern theological method. As can be seen throughout much of Althaus-Reid’s work, bodies then become types to help us understand such terms as God, grace, and salvation. However, if a reading of this work emphasises its critical side and the types are not considered the goal, then the bodies can reappear, standing at the margins, perhaps, but still concrete and personal. After all, if we can

⁴⁵ Althaus-Reid, ‘Doing the Theology of Memory: Counting Crosses and Resurrections’, FT/IT 116.

⁴⁶ QG 171.

⁴⁷ Such activist strategies using theology rather than being used by theology are akin to representations of Christ contextually as a member of a present-day marginalised community. This is different than the metaphorical move of much of *Indecent* and *Queer Theologies* in that it is a way to highlight God’s presence in such marginalised communities as a member of them, rather than to move from bodies to a general metaphor. For more on such christological imagery and the strange controversies caused by them, see Hall 495-6. Rather than leaping quickly over actual bodies, such imagery attempts to persuade people to see members of marginalised groups—such queer bodies—as existing within God’s love because of their particularities, and their particular sufferings.

write the traces of a strange God, we can also write the traces of strange bodies and their very human dreams. As Marcella Althaus-Reid might affirm, bodies in love can never be contained.

Chapter Four

The Story-Making Body:
Paul Ricoeur
and
the Body's Part in the Re-imagination of the World

Philosophical, theological, and literary theorist Paul Ricoeur is known mostly for wide-ranging studies of metaphor, narrative, history and hermeneutics. Yet, among his substantial corpus of writings, there winds a recurring thread of material concerning the self and identity, turning often around the idea of the narrated life and the pull of ethics. While Christian theologians as homiletics and scripture exegetes have gravitated to his reflections on Biblical interpretation, his focus on the embodied nature of the self provides a good vantage point to continue any attempt to discern the body. Dan Stiver, considering the significance of Ricoeur for Christian theology, writes that

Ricoeur's anthropology, which in a sense is the focus of his entire philosophy, also resonates with movements in theology. Theology's recovery of a holistic, embodied self is also in its nascent stages and has yet to be fully appropriated in Christian formation, education, ministry, preaching, and counseling, not to mention the speculative understanding of the afterlife. Such an embodied and social understanding of the self as Ricoeur's offers a constructive dialogue partner to theology as theologians try to rethink the way in which they have tended to denigrate the body and the world in favor of the "soul." The conception of the social self particularly relates to the church's concern to relate to the often rootless and alienated modern person.¹

Here, Stiver points to the way Ricoeur's construal of the human person as a being with a story, located as a body in relationship with others, allows for a strong value to be ascribed to bodies within the human pursuit of a meaningful response to divine mystery. This high esteem for embodied life combines with Ricoeur's extensive work on narrative and metaphor to present bodies with all their particularities as agents capable of restorative action in the world: when narratives reconfigure understandings of the world and metaphors redescribe meaning, they redefine a person's bodily place in the world by transforming possibilities. Not only do these bodies have stories, they also make them. Along with this, because Ricoeur's formulation of a poetic redefinition of the world requires a relationship of difference—between disparate things linked metaphorically or disparate situations linked by a plot—his notion of embodiment has less of a tendency to collapse particular bodies one into another. All of this would seem to make Ricoeur a strong ally for any theologian seeking to maintain the significance of material, physical life.

¹ Dan R. Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur* 250-1.

However, any such alliance with the work of Paul Ricoeur requires much more nuance. His constant desire to maintain tension between systems and viewpoints can cause the objects in tension to drift into fixed, hierarchical relationships. When Ricoeur extrapolates from a specific story to its narrative meaning, that meaning appears to gain value over the story itself, and the particular is subsumed into the conceptual. In a similar but inverse move, the explorations generated by theological discourse are labelled ‘second-order’, that is, as commentary or critique upon ‘first-order’ sacred texts (including attempts to live a holy life), thereby downplaying the creative aspect of theological writing. Thus, either by turning the story into representative material for something else or by curbing the range of theological creativity and thus the capacity for human beings to collaborate with God in doing God’s work, the importance of bodily particularity is diminished. The body threatens to disappear once again; in fact, one ends up unsure if the body was ever there. Still, Ricoeur’s refusal to limit the capacity of metaphor and narrative to generate possible worlds may, with care, become a tool to subvert his own theoretical structures. The questions that he provokes become more important than the barriers he erects; story-making bodies remain unfinished and malleable in their own capacity to participate in remaking the world.

In this chapter, I investigate the place of bodies and embodiment in the writings of Paul Ricoeur. I begin by looking at how he describes human selves and actions as embodied in several works that focus on his notions of philosophical anthropology, such as *Fallible Man* and *Oneself as Another*. Following this is a look at how Ricoeur presents the redefinition of the world through the possibilities of text and imagination. The chapter then turns to the problematic construal of narrative and meaning which leads to the potential devaluing of particular bodies and their specific stories, before ending with a reflection on ways that Ricoeur’s writings can be read against themselves, so that his work on the power of the imagination to transform the world might become part of a supportive matrix for the concrete particularities of bodies and their stories.

Searching for the Body in the Work of Paul Ricoeur

In much of Paul Ricoeur’s writing, his thoughts on embodiment must be intuited from what he implies; however, he does make explicit statements on the body, mainly in

work on human will and identity.² In the book *Fallible Man*, he summarises well the starting point of his approach to embodiment, declaring that

The first meaning I read in my body, insofar as the body is a mediation of appearance, is not that it is finite, but precisely that it is open onto.... It is this openness onto...which makes my body an originating mediator "between" myself and the world; it does not enclose me, like this bag of skin which, viewed from the outside, makes it seem like a thing in the midst of things. It opens me onto the world, either allowing perceived things to appear or making me dependent on things I lack and of which I experience the need and desire because they are elsewhere or even nowhere in the world. The body opens me onto the world even when it isolates me in suffering; for the solitude of suffering is still haunted by the threats of the world to which I feel myself exposed like an unprotected flank. It opens me to others insofar as it expresses, that is to say, displays the interior upon the exterior and becomes a sign for others, decipherable and offered to the reciprocity of consciousness. In a word, my body opens me to the world by everything it is able to do. It is implicated as a power in the instrumentality of the world, in the practicable aspects of this world that my action furrows through, in the products of work and art.³

Here, Ricoeur presents the body as much more than a vessel for human consciousness or the soul; in reality, the body is not, as he puts it, 'a bag of skin' which encloses a self, but is that part of a person which opens him or her to the rest of the world through sensory perception and through enabling various methods of communication. In other words, even if the concreteness of the body does function to limit human beings to a finite location in the universe, its more important function, for Ricoeur, is to give access to the world and thus to expand a person's existence. As the vehicle by which one knows that which is other to oneself, the body actually does not come to mind very often, unless something has gone wrong, unless some affliction has affected the body's ability to open up the world to a person. More than this, in providing access to that which is outside a person, the body also functions to make one's interior life accessible

² When looking for the views of Paul Ricoeur on any specific subject, including the body, a person needs to note that these views developed over time as reflected in the progression of his writings. One can identify stages in his work which are related to different focal points: these include writings on the will (in books such as *Freedom and Nature* and *Fallible Man*), on metaphor (as in *The Rule of Metaphor*), on narrative and history (as in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*), on identity and the self (*Oneself as Another* and other writings), and history and memory (as in *Memory, History, Forgetting*). None of these foci are self-contained, however; certain motifs and topics recur under the auspices of a later project. For discussions of this, see Stiver; Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*; and Mark I. Wallace's Introduction to the collection of Ricoeur's essays about religion, FS 1-32.

³ FM 19-20.

to others: essentially, Ricoeur describes the body as a text which others may read to learn about a person (though their interpretive may be inaccurate). Additionally, the body's connection to the world gives a person the chance to manipulate and affect the world. Overall, this construal of the nature of the body emphasises the productive role of its materiality.⁴

Ricoeur takes up the question of embodiment again in *Oneself as Another*, examining the role of bodies in the maintenance of any particular person's identity. He writes of 'the notion of person' as being 'a single referent possessing two series of predicates: physical predicates and mental predicates'.⁵ He also lists the attributes of bodies as being 'directly localizable, discrete, continuous in space, and stable in time'.⁶ These things Ricoeur connects to identity in terms of 'sameness'; one person's body can be recognised as being the same from one instant to another, which aids in being able to say that the person met now is the same as that person who had been met in the past. The significance of the body for selfhood lies in the fact that, because a particular person must be linked to a particular body, selfhood cannot be made a function solely of what Ricoeur calls 'mental events'. He writes that 'the person cannot be held to be a pure consciousness to which would then be added, in a secondary role, a body'.⁷ When you refer to a person, you refer to an entity with various characteristics and mannerisms, which are not all products of that person's interior life but also are physical, not only the way she or he looks, but including how he or she walks and the attitude addressed by the body. This returns to that idea of the body's productive role: embodied actions and habits participate in generating the identity of a self.

⁴ Loretta Dornisch, in *Faith and Philosophy in the Writings of Paul Ricoeur*, observes that Ricoeur in *Freedom and Nature* thinks of the body as the founding source for motives, including not only such driving forces as hunger and thirst but also other motives because their importance must always be weighed against those bodily yearnings (Dornisch 54-5). Dornisch also notes that it is the desiring body that is impelled to action (61). Though the first of these observations may seem to be very much about the interior life, both actually point to an orientation of the body towards production, pushing self-awareness outwards, with both motivating to action. Dornisch reflects that Ricoeur's conception of the body means that the meeting of person and world at the point of the body can be described 'through an image of openness or an image of light' (72). This demonstrates the high value Ricoeur places upon the body.

⁵ OA 33.

⁶ OA 36.

⁷ OA 34.

Yet, for Ricoeur, identity cannot rely on the body alone; the productivity of the body, along with providing characteristics particular to a specific person, also generates difficulties. It is through the body opening one to the world that a person perceives the finitude of their existence: Ricoeur argues that people learn about physical limitations by observing how a change in the orientation of the body alters one's perspective of the world, so that, because any one person may experience many different perspectives simply by changing position, that person learns that no single perspective affords a view of the whole world.⁸ As much as the body contributes to the production of personal characteristics, it also produces discontinuities which problematise the question of identity. Ricoeur notes that, even though specific bodies go with specific persons, a disconnection remains between the experience of the body as 'a public entity' and the experience of personal consciousness as a private one.⁹ No matter how much a person's interior life becomes available upon the surface of the body in signs others can interpret, that interior life can never be wholly known by another. To Ricoeur, to argue that it is enough to say that the physical body maintains a person's sameness is wrong because this neglects the question of *whose* body a body, *any* body, actually is. The problem is one of possession, of *my* body or *your* body, a problem complicated when one realises that the body makes a strange possession because it is 'untransferable property', bound to a particular person.¹⁰ The limitations the body teaches when you discover that the world and other people are separate from you, combined with this issue of possession, ensure that the body is not the end of questions elicited by pondering selfhood and identity.

The difficulties which Ricoeur notes revolve around two main issues connected to identity. The first appears in the title *Oneself as Another*: that one defines oneself by reference to another person. Ricoeur observes that 'I cannot speak meaningfully of my thoughts unless I am able at the same time to ascribe them potentially to someone else'.¹¹ That one even asks about the identity of oneself assumes another person entering into one's field of being. This requires a stronger opposition than 'someone' and

⁸ FM 20-1. See also Dornisch 69.

⁹ OA 34.

¹⁰ OA 37.

¹¹ OA 38.

‘someone else’; it needs the personal reflexivity of ‘I’ and ‘you’ to force a real question about selfhood rather than keeping to impersonal observation about human beings at a remove.¹² Ricoeur, ever the hermeneut, makes selfhood rely upon the possibility of communicating one’s beliefs and imaginations to others.

The second issue is the notion of identity itself. Ricoeur points out that identity actually involves two different concepts: sameness and selfhood.¹³ Identity as sameness, the concept most easily upheld by appeal to the body, refers to uniqueness, resemblance, continuity, and permanence in time: in other words, identity is determined by establishing the identical nature of one instance of a specific person or thing with another.¹⁴ The problem that Ricoeur finds with this notion of re-identification lies in the connection of continuity and permanence in time. Most organic beings change over time, yet we talk of a woman, for instance, and the girl she once was as being the same person; Ricoeur also posits an artificial device whose parts have all been gradually replaced, which one would say is the same item.¹⁵ Both examples require the concept of a governing structure, a genetic code or a definitive form, to ensure that the continuity which happens has stability over time. Ricoeur queries whether this structural determinism is enough for identifying a self; he argues that our experience of what constitutes a person suggests otherwise.¹⁶ He observes that ‘human lives become more intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them’.¹⁷ When it comes to a person, we associate the identity of a self with memories of specific events, with the experiences that one has, as well as particular relationships in which a person participates, none of which can be summed up solely by reference to that person’s genetic code.

¹² OA 39.

¹³ He identifies these using the Latin *idem* and *ipse* respectively. Paul Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Identity’, *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* 189-92, and OA 115-25. As is often the case with Ricoeur’s work the short essay summarises much of the longer work, especially the fifth and sixth studies of OA, ‘Personal Identity and Narrative Identity’ and ‘The Self and Narrative Identity’, in which much of the material for this consideration of body and narrative may be found.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Identity’ 189-90.

¹⁵ OA 117.

¹⁶ OA 118.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Identity’, 188.

In the face of this quandary, Ricoeur turns to identity as selfhood, which he expresses in terms of a person's 'character' and the notion of 'keeping one's word'.¹⁸ 'Character', Ricoeur declares, 'designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized'; that is, character includes the array of beliefs, attitudes, habits of expression, interests and biases whose combination are unique to a specific individual.¹⁹ A particular person can be said to act *in* or *out of* character, for instance, so that the identification of a person is made by checking what that person does against what is known of that person. However, 'keeping one's word' has to do with a willed faithfulness to a promise maintained over time, something which is not limited by character but still speaks of one person's permanence in time.²⁰ In other words, loyalty to a promise can be to something which is against character, but even so represent stability over time as it is oneself which keeps the promise. The potential clash between character and the keeping of one's word also signals an opposition of sameness and constancy—it shows a difference within the notion of identity, even of identity as selfhood.

To address the various paradoxes of identity, Ricoeur proposes what he calls 'narrative identity': this moves beyond a structural determinism of such things as genetic code by fixing the identity of oneself to the particular story of one's life—to be more precise, narrative identity refers to the way people forge their identities through the stories they tell about themselves. To summarise: Ricoeur argues that people construct their identities by putting the events which they experience into a narrative order—what he terms 'emplotment'—modelled after fictional or historical stories.²¹ Such wielding of narrative joins together the fact that one possesses both a body and

¹⁸ OA 118.

¹⁹ OA 121.

²⁰ OA 123-4.

²¹ The term 'emplotment' has a long pedigree in translations of Ricoeur's work, beginning with TN vol. 1 37f—something he notes himself in OA, 143 n4. As specifying the action of putting events into a narrative order, the word seems to have become quite associated with Ricoeur, though it should be noted that not all translators resort to it; for example, J. N. Kraay and A. J. Scholten, the 1987 translators of what they called 'Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator' use terms like 'the act of plotting' and 'the operation of plotting' instead, as seen in RR, 426. The same article appears as 'Life in Quest of Narrative' in Wood, *On Paul Ricoeur*, where David Wood chooses 'emplotment' to translate Ricoeur's French (21). Along with these articles and the books TN and OA, see the chapters 'The Human Experience of Time and Narrative', 'The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality', and 'Narrated Time' in RR, 99-116, 117-36, and 338-54, respectively.

experiences of that body, of acting through that body and being acted upon.²² Ricoeur writes that ‘It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or from history’.²³ All the excessive events of the body, the unruliness and untidiness, together with one’s own idiosyncratic experience of the world, may be connected by the way we see them to be connected, by fashioning them into stories—with the key proviso being that a new event or insight could change the overall plot. Selfhood becomes a function of the narrative understanding of one’s life.

Yet, Ricoeur’s analysis of the embodied self does not end with human imagination forming a coherent and complete plot from the events a person experiences. Instead, Ricoeur presents the trio of ‘describe, narrate, prescribe’ as the operational structure of being a self in relationship with others.²⁴ One describes events that happen to oneself and then makes them intelligible—to oneself and others—by narrating them, sketching out how the events connect in time and to the themes that one has discerned in one’s life. Narration forms a pivot, however, to the next step, prescription, by which one extends one’s life story; that is, the trends in one’s narrative suggest what might come next. Ricoeur states that, along with organising one’s past, ‘the narrative also recounts care’ by revealing the ‘projects, expectations, and anticipations by means of which the protagonists in the narrative are oriented toward their mortal future’.²⁵ The same narrative imagination which calls for attention to new possibilities and a willingness to rearrange the stories of oneself as one’s situation changes also allows a person to imagine the way life could be different. This constitutes an ethical imagination, a visionary faculty that urges one to act in a particular way toward others in the world—the world to which one is opened, remember, by one’s body.²⁶ For Ricoeur, this means that the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ becomes the slightly counter-intuitive ‘Here I am!’ by which one claims a position with regard to moral commitments.²⁷

²² This is what Ricoeur states is needed as he builds his argument in OA, 132.

²³ OA 162.

²⁴ OA 114.

²⁵ OA 163.

²⁶ OA 164.

Interior understanding must be embodied by exterior action; this is the story-making body.

Imagination, Creativity, Reconstruction

Embedded in the notion of a narrative identity for an embodied self lay Ricoeur's general conceptions concerning language and creative imagination, which revolve around metaphor and, of course, narrative emplotment. Although the two imaginative processes differ in degree and reference, with metaphor referring to the basic building blocks of language and poetry and emplotment to the organisation of events in the lives of literary or historical characters, they both assume a surprisingly similar functional shape. Both begin with the world that one perceives or experiences, whether that be in the form of words or events; in both, a person reorganises those initial perceptions, the words or events, bringing them into relationship with one another, and out of that relationship produces new meanings and possibilities. With both, Ricoeur presents processes for the creative reconstruction of the world through the imagination.²⁸

For Ricoeur, metaphor stands at the heart of the way language works. Speaking very broadly, what happens with metaphor is that one takes a word referring to one specific entity or event and describes it by use of another, mostly unrelated term. By correlating two different terms, the meanings (or semantic fields) of both are altered, even if only slightly. Such a redescription of words has the power to change how readers or hearers perceive the world. Ricoeur writes that

we can say that poetic language has a mimetic function inasmuch as it is a heuristic fiction preparing a redescription of reality. If it is true that poetry gives no information in terms of empirical knowledge, it may change our way of looking at things, a change that is no less real than empirical knowledge. What is changed by poetic language is our way of

²⁷ OA 167.

²⁸ Both the metaphorical process of redescribing the world and the narrative process of refiguring the world may also be related to Ricoeur's general hermeneutical arc which postulates that, in the process of interpretation, people move from a naïve to a critical to a post-critical understanding (also known as a second naïveté). Stiver graphically maps a possibility of connecting the hermeneutical arc with other imaginative and creative processes in *Theology After Ricoeur*, Figure 2, 75. Note the similar triadic structure of the 'describe, narrate, prescribe' process of narrative selfhood discussed above.

dwelling in the world. From poetry we receive a new way of being in the world, of orienting ourselves in this world.²⁹

By being able to change a person's perception, a metaphor can change a person's behaviour and reality. Metaphors take apart the way people think they know and then put that back together in a new form. They generate meaning by multiplying levels of understanding.³⁰

With narrative and emplotment, the material is different, as is the terminology that Ricoeur chooses—all based on the root 'figuration', the shaping and reshaping of experiences into an ordered figure—but, as with metaphor, the active heart of the process is the generation of new ways to see and comprehend the world. In this case, though, 'the world' includes its history; refiguration is a chronological function. As recorded in an interview, Ricoeur states that his 'work on narrativity' extends 'his inquiry into the inventive power of language', where

the analysis of narrative operations in a literary text, for instance, can teach us how we formulate a new structure of 'time' by creating new modes of plot and characterization. My chief concern in this analysis is to discover how the act of *raconter*, of telling a story, can transmute *natural* time into a specifically *human* time, irreducible to mathematical, chronological 'clock time'.³¹

Ricoeur argues that human beings organize their experience of time narratively; the resulting emplotment creates something new, 'human time' that is differentiated from the strict chronology which timepieces attempt to measure. The transmutation of time is a way of making sense of the world just as much as metaphors and models are. Imagination again plays a key role, with the ability to imagine alternate pasts affording one the capacity to draft a narrative, whether in a literary or historical form, or of one's life.³²

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, 'Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language', RR, 85.

³⁰ Ricoeur's most intensive study of Metaphor is *The Rule of Metaphor*. However, a number of articles summarise Ricoeur's thought on the matter, including 'Word, Polysemy, Metaphor' and 'Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics', RR, 303-19.

³¹ Paul Ricoeur, interview with Richard Kearney, 'The Creativity of Language', RR 463.

³² Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrated Time', RR 352-4. See also Ricoeur, 'The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality', RR, and 'Can Fictional Narratives be True?' *The Phenomenology of Man and of the Human Condition*, ed. A.T. Tymieniecka 3-19. For studies of Ricoeur's conception of narrative and emplotment, see Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, esp. the chapter 'Between Imagination and Language' 35-58, but also 'Between Poetics and Ethics' 99-114; see also Stiver 100-36.

All of this seems to be conducive to keeping in mind the material particularity of human bodies and their stories. Ricoeur's conceptions of the creative operation of language require a body in that they require a shape within the world; they also require a shape that can produce new things, augmenting the world, as the processes Ricoeur studies call people to have the ability to relate them—the new meanings from metaphors, or the stories which they compose—to others. As Ricoeur declares:

There is no function of imagination, no *imaginaire*, that is not structuring or structured, that is not said or about-to-be-said in language. The task of hermeneutics is to charter the unexplored resources of the to-be-said on the basis of the already-said. Imagination never resides in the unsaid.³³

Imagination must have an instance, some type of material existence, in order for communication to occur. This instance links past and future, and the fact that Ricoeur places narrativity at a similar place in the heart of selfhood, linking description to prescription—with the story-making body—renders it possible for Ricoeur to carry over the world-making properties of creative imagination in language to the productive nature of bodies in their relation to one another and the world.

Prospects of Losing the Body in the Work of Paul Ricoeur

Although it seems that, in Paul Ricoeur, we have discovered a thinker who not only takes the body seriously but also attends to the surplus nature of creativity in the processes by which bodies manifest the formation of selves, some of the tensions pull so strongly that gaps open up and threaten to swallow bodies whole. Even a quick scan of Ricoeur's oeuvre will reveal a thoroughgoing penchant for separations and differences; most of his philosophy relies upon the tension and friction produced by bringing two different entities or concepts together. Because of this, Ricoeur cannot allow any alliance to be unproblematic. But this in itself is not where the body may be lost; in fact, the general tension creates a space for the lived (and living) body to thrive. The quandary lies instead in the impermeability of so many of the boundaries Ricoeur presents, together with a strangely hierarchical valuation. The prime example occurs in the observation that Ricoeur not only wants to hold philosophy and theology in tension with one another, he refuses to allow any admixture between them. Thus, when he

³³ Ricoeur, 'Creativity' 471.

published most of his Gifford Lectures as *Oneself as Another*, he decided not to include theological works which had originally been part of those lectures; instead, he published the lectures with overtly theological content separately, all because he did

not want to insinuate that the self, formed and informed by the biblical paradigms, crowns the self of our philosophical hermeneutics. This would be to betray our unambiguous affirmation that the mode of Christian life is a wage and a destiny, and those who take it up are not led by their confession either to assume a defensive position or to presume a superiority in relation to every other form of life, because we lack criteria of comparison capable of dividing among rival claims.³⁴

This protestation curiously functions simultaneously to diminish and exalt the self formed by Christian faith: the religious self may not be superior to the identity which Ricoeur analyses through his philosophical hermeneutics, but as it seems to be of a wholly other order, it remains incomparable. In the end, the strict separation between theology and philosophy to which Ricoeur adheres points towards two different models of the body and materiality in his writings, one being extremely positive and the other decidedly mixed in value.³⁵

As we saw above, Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics tend to lead to a productive, story-making body, situated in the world by relating to others. His theological writings, however, underscore a tendency to place meaning at a conceptual rather than a material level. When Ricoeur writes about imagination and the Bible, he posits that the key for finding the significance of a narrative or poetic work lay in applying that work to one's life, or to one's perception of life in the world.³⁶ Yet, this application works mainly in terms of the concepts which are being communicated by the work—the meanings which exist at some remove from the work itself, meanings which the work represents. Take parables, for example: Ricoeur states that 'the narrative-parable is itself an itinerary of meaning, a signifying dynamism, which

³⁴ Ricoeur, 'The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation', FS 262-3. This quotation is also discussed in Stiver 235.

³⁵ Stiver also notes Ricoeur's attempt to compartmentalise theology and philosophy (28, 158, 231, 238-47). Stiver argues that this is a self-deception on Ricoeur's part, as Ricoeur continues to use religious language and sensibilities in his specifically philosophical writings. He also suggests that it is a modernist remnant in a mostly postmodernist philosophy which would be more thoroughly postmodern if it recognised that boundaries are porous and that philosophy and theology cannot, indeed should not, be kept separate. Still, Stiver himself perpetuates the distinction, as he does not really see Ricoeur as doing theology but as a philosopher whose work theologians can adapt—even when Ricoeur writes about theological issues, these are 'religious writings' (29). See also 186.

³⁶ Ricoeur, 'The Bible and the Imagination', FS 146.

transforms a narrative structure into a metaphorical process, in the direction of an enigma-expression...the kingdom of God'.³⁷ In other words, the parable functions to signal a meaning that comes from elsewhere.

While reflecting on the importance as well as the problems of narrative theology, one of the issues Ricoeur discusses is 'the transition from narrative to explicit theological discourse'.³⁸ This in itself is not so problematic; in fact, it is probably good to be reminded that narrative (fictional or historical) is not the same as theology. However, Ricoeur continues by stating that 'non-narrative modes [in the Bible]... by contributing to the full *meaningfulness* of biblical narratives, start the transfer from mere storytelling to the grasping of the enduring signification of the stories themselves'.³⁹ In other words, the meaningfulness of any story in relation to theology comes from outside the story, and more significant than the stories is the process of grasping their significance. The phrasing that Ricoeur chooses shows an explicit valuation: even if meaning cannot be divorced from the form that generates it, it is still the meaning that is most important. In a concluding note, Ricoeur grudgingly gives approval to a quote from Dietrich Ritschl saying that 'Stories, in their typical linguistic form of narration, are not the forms of expression but the raw materials of theology'.⁴⁰ Thus, metaphor and emplotment can change the world, but the emphasis lies upon the process of metaphorisation and signification more than in the particular metaphors or narratives and the works which embody or portray them.

If, then, particular stories can be seen as raw materials for more exacting work—for the different register of linguistic work that is theology, let us say—these particular stories stand in peril of falling to the side, of being deemed less important than the finished product of theological craft which reveals the full meaningfulness of the work. If particular stories are deemed less important this would suggest that the particular people whose experiences the stories share out may also be found less important than some overarching movement. In Ricoeur, as in so many others, it would seem that particularity is beholden to abstraction once again. The bodies which carry these stories

³⁷ Ricoeur, 'The Bible and the Imagination', FS 147.

³⁸ Ricoeur, 'Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties', FS 246.

³⁹ Ricoeur, 'Toward a Narrative Theology', FS 246. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, 'Toward a Narrative Theology', FS 248 n19.

waver in and out of view, their substantiality waiting to be subsumed by a grander concept, concrete pains and joys obscured.

This could be related to a linguistic thread that appears early on, in *Fallible Man*, where, even though Ricoeur points to the importance of embodiment, he also writes that ‘the Heart’ is connected to ‘Care’ so that its ‘fundamental openness or availability is always opposed to the greed of the body and living’.⁴¹ Life and the body are associated with greed, while upper-case-‘h’ Heart has all the high-minded ideals like sacrifice of self for others. This blatant linguistic positioning of the body below interior motivation wanes; however, Ricoeur does include in *Oneself as Another* a rather odd argument about the brain being phenomenologically separate from the rest of the body, founded on the fact that you never really experience your brain, but experience everything else through it.⁴² With this discussion, Ricoeur sets up his counter-argument to those who question the essentials of identity using puzzling episodes in science fiction which involve the scientific altering of a person’s brain, locating all features of human identity in the brain’s materiality.⁴³ Even so, Ricoeur’s apparent separation of the brain from the body also distances from the body the faculty of thought and the seat of most of the functions by which people construct their selves through narration. This separation of the body from one’s interior life and will reappears near the end of the book, when Ricoeur hierarchises different kinds of suffering, arguing that in such things as ‘disesteem of self and hatred of others...suffering exceeds physical pain’.⁴⁴ Although the narrated self must be able to act in the world, the process at the heart of this seems to be removed from embodiment.

At the same time as he attaches ambiguity to materiality’s value, Ricoeur moves to limit the creativity of the embodied self. The connection between fiction and life-narration only goes so far—Ricoeur takes pains to point out that he is referring to people being narrators and not authors of their own lives. This is particularly noticeable in his essay ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’, where he writes about narrative identity as

⁴¹ FM 104.

⁴² OA 132-3. On reading this, one imagines that Ricoeur could not have been a sufferer of migraines.

⁴³ This opposition is provided from Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, and is addressed in ‘Narrative Identity’ as well as the fifth and sixth studies in OA.

⁴⁴ OA 320.

being formed by a person's comparison of her or his life with the various narrative voices which populate the stories that we read, stating that

We can become our own narrator, in imitation of these narrative voices, without being able to become the author. This is the great difference between life and fiction. In this sense, it is true that life is lived and that stories are told. An unbridgeable difference does remain, but this difference is partially abolished by our power of applying to ourselves the plots that we have received from our culture and of trying on the different roles assumed by the favourite characters of the stories most dear to us. It is therefore by imaginative variations of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves.⁴⁵

In their construction of narrative identity, Ricoeur portrays people primarily as performers 'trying on roles', experimenting to see what might fit their experience of life. People apply to their own lives the 'narrative voices' of characters with whom they identify, but there is no option for people to create original characters as authors would. The body is only story-making, then, to the point of putting together building blocks of narrative.⁴⁶ Still, this arguably is what authors do in any case: weave already-known elements into a new variation. Ricoeur's 'narrator' acts very much like an 'author' rather than the character in a story which recounts the tale, yet still Ricoeur seems compelled to differentiate between the two.

Again and again, Ricoeur separates fiction from history, fiction from life. In addition to what has already been noted, he addresses in *Oneself as Another* what he sees as the main objections to his idea of narrative identity—all based around the difference between fiction and real life—by declaring that, while the objections are 'perfectly acceptable', 'they do not seem to me to be such as to abolish the very notion

⁴⁵ Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', 32-3. As mentioned previously, another translation of this essay into English exists and, while this quotation is not substantially different in either version, the question of authorship over against narration comes out very differently in another spot in the same paragraph, where 'Life in Quest of Narrative' has 'that we learn to become the *narrator* and the hero of *our own story*, without actually becoming the *author of our own life*' (32, italics in original) and 'Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator' has 'we learn to become the *narrator of our own story* without completely becoming the author of our life' (437).

⁴⁶ Ricoeur's treatment of creativity and narrativity in his strict distinction between narration and authorship may be compared and contrasted with Hauerwas's story-formed ethics, discussed in Chapter Two. At first glance, the difference between the two thinkers is more obvious: Hauerwas argues that Christian lives receive their shape from the overall Christian story in which they find their place; Ricoeur's formulation of narrative identity gives people more leeway to shape their own stories. On the other hand, both Hauerwas and Ricoeur deny authorship to people; for both of them, fiction's main purpose where identity is concerned is to be instructive—Ricoeur thinks of constructed, existing art as a 'detour' which provides room for 'self-interpretation' on the way to a refigured understanding ('Narrative Identity', 198).

of the *application* of fiction to life'.⁴⁷ These objections include: a continuation of the discussion that people are not their own authors; that people experience themselves in the midst of their life stories while fictional narratives have beginnings, middles, and ends; and that real life stories are always implicated in the stories of others (parents and communities, for examples) so that people actually face multiple versions of their own story, while fictional texts create unique worlds separate from one another.⁴⁸ The instrumentality of fiction in Ricoeur's formulations also appears in the way he favours realism, setting 'literary fiction' against such genre writing as science fiction.⁴⁹ It is almost as if his own work to bring fiction and real life into a productive relationship frightens Ricoeur into protesting their difference.⁵⁰

This possible 'fear' connects to the idea that theology functions as second-order discourse, as critical commentary upon the sacred texts which are the real focus of faith's hermeneutical discipline.⁵¹ At the same time that narrative is seen as 'raw material' for theology, the purpose of theology becomes elucidating texts of religious experience. The important texts are actually those which report divine discourse, whether these be sacred texts or a spiritual communication between God and a believer that is made manifest in the experiences of the believer; theological texts are not really first-order, creative discourses in their own right.⁵² This means that bodily materiality is doubly obscured: first by the higher value given to conceptual meaning, and second by the limitations put on human creativity.

⁴⁷ OA 161. Italics in original.

⁴⁸ OA 160-1. It is surprising that Ricoeur accepts the last of these objections; certainly he must have known of the concept of intertextuality, as he uses that in a 1981 discussion of biblical texts ('The Bible and the Imagination', FS 149). Apparently, biblical narratives gain a relationship through their specific religious context, while novels and the like create independent worlds, though this still oddly ignores such literary techniques as allusions to other texts.

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, 'Narrative Identity,' 196-8; OA, 150.

⁵⁰ See also Helen M. Buss, 'Women's Memoirs and the Embodied Imagination: The Gendering of Genre that Makes History and Literature Nervous', *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative*, ed. Morny Joy 87, for a more intensive reflection sparked from the observation of the strict boundaries between fiction and history that Ricoeur seems to want to maintain at all cost.

⁵¹ Almost all of Ricoeur's theological texts discuss the interpretation of Scripture or the correlation of life and Scripture. See FS as well as the list of theological/religious writings provided in Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 28.

⁵² My interpretation of this point relies heavily on Stiver's discussion which takes for granted this identification of theology as critical commentary that relies upon other texts, even praising it as maintaining the high position of sacred text (74-9). Though the strong emphasis here could be that of Stiver rather than Ricoeur, the approach belied by Ricoeur's writings seems quite consonant with this.

The Possibility of the Body in Ricoeur in Spite of Ricoeur

Ricoeur moves beyond a simple collocation of the self and the body toward a productive body, the story-making body, what he calls '*homo capax*', the capable human being.⁵³ But Ricoeur himself confesses that he is unsure whether his focus on the ability of people to construct their pasts, moving from description to prescription through a capacity for narration, might not sufficiently take into account the infirmities which may afflict the body or the suffering inflicted by people upon one another.⁵⁴ In saying this, he implies that perhaps his construal of the embodied self is a little too neat, a little too reliant upon the mental manipulations of persons reflecting upon their experiences. One can extrapolate from this that, since it is not only pain and suffering that result in the body's messiness, there are other factors which can destabilise Ricoeur's formulation here, too: love, joy, desire, dangling one's feet in cool water while sitting on a dock in the middle of a hot day. In his own observations, Ricoeur points back to places in his work which, if they had a stronger emphasis in the whole, might alleviate some of the problems.

For an example of how this re-reading of Ricoeur might proceed, look at Helen M. Buss's essay 'Women's Memoirs and the Embodied Imagination: The Gendering of Genre that Makes History and Literature Nervous', in which Buss provides a feminist interpretation of Ricoeur's work on the imagination and the self. Buss emphasises the embodied nature of the imagination, proclaiming that Ricoeur's own language and use of metaphors encourage her to focus on the idea that the self belongs just as much to the body as to history and, that being the case, that the imagination is gendered by the particularities of the body.⁵⁵ She brings Ricoeur into conversation with Judith Butler, portraying them basically as collaborators in constructivist notions, where 'acts of the body...participate in making new meanings'.⁵⁶ Buss then looks to women's memoir-writing to exemplify this. The re-reading and resulting conclusions are possible because

⁵³ Paul Ricoeur, 'A Response by Paul Ricoeur', *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative* xxxix.

⁵⁴ Ricoeur, 'A Response', xxxix-xl.

⁵⁵ Buss 88-9.

⁵⁶ Buss 92.

Buss figures that the meaning-making redescription of the world detailed in Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor is a concept strong enough to trump his insistence on the separation of fiction and history.⁵⁷

In his essay on narrative theology, one of the problems Ricoeur finds with the narrativists' approach is that it prioritises what he calls the 'Christian pattern' which constrains all discord in the stories of the world to the necessary concord of the one universal salvation history that Jesus mediates.⁵⁸ Stories that do not fit are made to fit, or ignored. Rather than the chronological pattern which is too often assumed in a Christian theological consideration of canonical biblical narrative, Ricoeur reminds readers that the overarching story to which the Bible refers is not actually a 'closed' story, with beginning, middle, and end. There may be complete stories within the all-encompassing story by which the faithful construe history, and these smaller stories do illumine the trends of the larger, but that larger story itself is not complete and hence cannot be contained or fully known. Ricoeur declares that

There are stories of the exodus, of the passion, and even more fragmentary stories such as the story of Joseph or that of Peter's betrayal. But the story of the partnership between God and Israel is, as such, not only open and ongoing but unfathomable and unspeakable.⁵⁹

This openness to the story—to history—generates an open space for particularity, as an unfinished story demands more details. A story that has not been closed even defies the concepts which have been determined to govern its process, for there may always be a twist in the plot or a development of an existing situation which clarifies or makes ambiguous what one thinks one knows. A concentration on the openness of narratives, as well as on the changeability of oneself, can bring back to the forefront the story-making body.


⁵⁷ Buss 87-8.

⁵⁸ Ricoeur, 'Toward a Narrative Theology', FS 238.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur, 'Toward a Narrative Theology', FS 242-3.

Conclusion to Part One

A Note about Feminist Epistemologies

 In considering theological approaches to bodies and stories, I have looked most closely at four thinkers, two associated primarily with the investigation of the body (Graham Ward and Marcella Althaus-Reid) and two with the issue of narrative (Stanley Hauerwas and Paul Ricoeur), albeit in different ways and not without each of them exploring to some extent the issue of the connection of bodies and stories. One of the tendencies they all share is a deep unease about the limitations of bodies and the partial and located nature of the stories contingent upon them. They move theologically to erase boundaries between bodies, or to subordinate personal stories to an overarching faith narrative or a deep structure, or to treat persons and their embodied lives as symbolic representatives of some other truth. I speak of such moves as tendencies because they by no means happen all the time, nor even are they necessarily intrinsic to the thinkers whose work I have investigated; writing by the same thinkers in different contexts may approach the issues involved from quite different angles. Yet, the inclination remains: a theological propensity to abstraction tends to look beyond the body, to seek meaning elsewhere and level out the complexity of embodied life. Accompanying this tendency is a hierarchy of valuation which, in placing the spiritual (understood variously) above the material, makes it far too easy for people to read a relationship of domination, of oppressive power over others, over certain bodies of particular people and their stories.

Seeing the way this tendency seems tied to theological method leads one to ask if it is simply a predisposition of the discipline: does the doing of theology necessarily lead to an underappreciation of the material world as theology seeks the ways of the divine? Does theology always collapse diversity into commonality by way of abstraction? Perhaps, as a discipline, it tends to; however, not every theology does. In the beginning of their book *Controversies in Feminist Theology*, Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood write that

One of the strengths of feminist theologies has always been the ability to include many voices within the debate. Of course detractors have seen this as a weakness, complaining that it signals a lack of internal methodological cohesion—as Mary Daly warned us years ago masculinist theology bows down to methodolatry and we should not do the same. This is not the same thing at all as having no method and no cohesion, it is however about creating space for diverse voices to express what they experience about the divine among and between us. It is about respect and an overwhelming belief that the divine cannot be contained

by any one group whoever they may be and however blessed and sanctioned they believe themselves to be.¹

The authors note plurality of voice as a key characteristic of feminist theology; indeed, while the title of the book speaks of ‘feminist theology’ in the singular, the text enacts multiplicity by referring to ‘feminist theologies’ from the start. They turn the esteem given to the idea of a single, unified theological view, voiced from one location using one method, upside-down: they declare that such singularity is actually reductive and cannot account for the full complexity of the experience of God by human beings in their embodied lives. This is a theological method which seems to suggest that, no, the doing of theology does not necessitate a distancing from the particular.

At its heart, this alternate notion of how theology works involves a certain type of logic concerning what knowledge entails and what truth is. To be able to say that many voices have something to say about the truth means that you believe that each of those voices may speak with some aspect or degree of truthfulness. It is a question of how one knows truly. This also inscribes a fragmentation of truth; it parcels out access to truth in the various understandings of meaning, and so pulls away from an idea that Truth is some separate entity that must be discovered on the other side of any actualisation of it. If Christian theologians wish to be a little less haunted by plurality—or to see bodies in their particularities of location and time, desire and storied identities—then we need to be able to accept such a dividing of truth in the way we know.² In other words, a feminist theology which encourages not only multiple voices but also multiple visions as told by those voices, can go far in remedying some of the problematic tendencies that I have noted in various theological assessments of bodies.

To look more closely at this alternate notion of what theology does, one may direct one’s attention to its roots, to the thinking about sense and knowledge which enables it. One may follow the hint given by feminist theologies and turn to the feminist

¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Feminist Theology* 1. This provides a good example of the way any one of the four thinkers highlighted in this thesis may not be bound to the theological tendencies that have been observed in some parts of their work.

² This is not to say that theology has not traditionally seen any nuance in its understanding of knowledge and truth. Christian theological epistemology generally involves tension between different kinds of knowledge, as can be seen, for example, in credal statements which attempt to hold together such notions as one and three, or human and divine. But, in this, truth can still remain quite circumscribed; one can argue the tension is observable because we, in the creaturely limitations of our embodiment, cannot see the whole truth. On the other hand, this is also not to say that there are no theological traditions which do not circumscribe truth in such a manner; numerous mystical and apophatic traditions would argue that truth cannot be fully known.

philosophies, specifically varieties of feminist epistemology, which underpin them. Feminist standpoint theory, introduced previously in the concluding section of the chapter on Graham Ward's theology, is one of the strongest currents of this epistemology. As mentioned, the roots of standpoint theory lay in attempts to uphold an epistemological methodology which recognises that research cannot be free of bias; in other words, any attempt to find one universal and neutral knowledge concerning any given subject is doomed to failure. Instead of trying to determine this one truth, supporters of standpoint theory argue that researchers should seek to analyse what they observe from the point of view of their own experience quite self-consciously, because, if they do, there is a greater chance that they might remain aware that others possibly have a different experience, asking different questions that lead to a different understanding of what is true.³ Such awareness would lead to making room for alternate viewpoints.

A common criticism of standpoint theory is that it is epistemologically relativistic—that the idea that there can be more than one knowledge that is observably true concerning the substance of the world suggests that no one rational system for determining knowledge is necessarily better than another—thus undermining the scientific project for a rational understanding of all that is.⁴ One response to this critique is to note that standpoint theory does not refer just to points of view but to *engaged* points of view. The theory is explicitly activist, calling practitioners to struggle to uncover not only what different understandings are but also how the dominant theory impinges upon the vision of the less dominant group; uncovering the vision of those who stand at the margins can then lead to changing the relationship between dominant and oppressed groups.⁵ This is the point where standpoint theory becomes specifically feminist. What needs to be noted is that standpoints are understood in relation to one another, as part of a network that requires difference and particularity.

³ See Dorothy E. Smith, 'Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology', FST 30, for an illustration of how observers may not necessarily see all the truths of what they observe: the author cites a time when she saw through a train window a man, a woman, and three children and assumed they were a family.

⁴ Sandra Harding, 'Introduction', FST 10-2. Regardless of actual critique, the cry of 'Relativism!' is definitely seen as a criticism that must be addressed by standpoint theorist, as the index in the reader shows no less than nineteen references to the topic.

⁵ Nancy Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', FST 36-7.

A second response to charges of relativism comes in what Sandra Harding calls ‘strong objectivity’: that traditional empirical notions of objective knowledge—known simultaneously from nowhere in particular and everywhere in abstract—are actually ‘not rigorous or objectifying enough’ because they do not factor in variables such as embodiment and location.⁶ Harding contends that cultural particularities affect every step in the scientific process, starting from the researcher’s choice of questions to ask about a subject, and that the only real way to unveil such cultural bias in a knowledge-producing community is to examine the process from the perspective of those on the margins of the community; she declares that ‘strong objectivity requires that scientists and their communities be integrated into democracy-advancing projects for scientific and epistemological reasons as well as moral and political ones’.⁷ By including in one’s investigation questions such as whose knowledge is being discussed and what are the aims of the people who are producing that knowledge claim, a researcher, rather than being relativist, can strive to determine which competing claim to truth is better.⁸ Harding states that ‘the subjects/agents of knowledge for feminist standpoint theory are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent’ with one another, and even with themselves, as everyone is liable to be a member of multiple communities implying a variety of commitments; however, this plurality does not make the theory relativist or pluralist, but instead makes it realistic in seeing the need to identify all the interests which are involved in research.⁹

Elaborating on the idea that no knowledge claim can be neutral, the philosopher of science Donna Haraway has written about what she terms ‘situated knowledges’, observing that the belief that any person can possess ‘infinite vision’ can only be an illusion, as the production of human knowledge always originates with embodied persons.¹⁰ As has been noted throughout this thesis so far, bodies have limits; thus, any insistence on vision as embodied means that vision, and any knowledge, is unavoidably

⁶ Sandra Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is “Strong Objectivity”?’ FST 128.

⁷ Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology’ 136.

⁸ Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology’ 131-2.

⁹ Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology’ 134. This denial of pluralism/relativism could be what makes standpoint theory so easy for a theologian such as Graham Ward to pick up. Note the way he incorporates plurality into his argument in CTRP but still ends by privileging Christian theology. (See Chapter One above.)

¹⁰ Haraway 86-7.

partial. Indeed, Haraway argues that, because all knowledge is embodied, or physically and materially situated, and the quest for transcendent vision is false, then ‘only partial perspective promises objective vision’.¹¹ She also notes that ‘The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see without claiming to be another’.¹² In other words, the admission that you only know in part aids in keeping you from ignoring the perspectives of others. This suggests that adopting the view that knowledge is partial makes it easier to produce a space where those voices and visions which have been repressed might be able to make themselves known, augmenting the fullness of the complexity of knowledge.

A situated knowledge demands a high value for the consideration of particular, concrete, and material bodies. Yet Haraway’s argument extends beyond the edge of the body to refer to bodies in relationship to one another. She sums up her position by declaring

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people’s lives; the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.¹³

The ‘view from a body’ is a located view, situated in a specific place, and relies on its proximity to other bodies for the details both of sight and what is seen. Haraway posits that the ‘boundaries [of bodies and their locations] materialize in social interactions’ in that they ‘are drawn by mapping practices’ performed by people in the encounter of body with body.¹⁴ One person’s partial knowledge depends upon another’s—depends upon trusting others also to have partial knowledge which might fill in what you are missing.¹⁵ This trust entails a certain ethic of relating to others in which you defer not to those stronger than you but to those who are weaker (the privileging of visions from the

¹¹ Haraway 87.

¹² Haraway 90.

¹³ Haraway 92.

¹⁴ Haraway 97.

¹⁵ Haraway notes that ‘location is about vulnerability’ and that it ‘resists the politics of closure’ (93). Valuing location in knowledge claims means being open to additional knowledge, even if that forces you to adjust what you believe you know.

margin which has already been mentioned) while, as Haraway warns, guarding against ‘the danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their position’.¹⁶ The ‘view from a body’ demands honesty about your location on a map of your proximity to other bodies and their knowledges, as well as generosity towards the perspectives of those others.

Feminist standpoint epistemology and principles of strong objectivity, therefore, constitute a rich resource for doing a theology which strives to deconstruct a monolithic insistence on the singularity of claims to truth. The theory opens up the possibility that theology could rejoice in the messiness of the body, including voices as different as Ward, Hauerwas, Althaus-Reid and Ricoeur, allowing each of them to speak of truth as they see it and augment the world without having to say that one voice is the sole possessor of the most correct knowledge. This is, of course, not new, and has already entered theological discussion.¹⁷ However, approaches to the theory by different theological discourses may lead to quite different outcomes than what I have suggested; for instance, as seen with Ward, incorporating standpoint theory into Christian theology may generate a positive view of multiplicity to a degree, but still not greatly change the obscuration of particular bodies. The determination of what happens depends on the emphasis given, on interpretative choices. Thus, on one hand, Ward prioritises the agonistic nature of the standpoint theory which declares that a standpoint must be achieved by contestation.¹⁸ On the other hand, Pamela Sue Anderson chooses to accentuate the collaborative element derived from the theory’s call for empathy.¹⁹ Standpoint theory’s contribution to theology varies hermeneutically; what theologians determine such epistemology supports must derive from yet another source.

¹⁶ Haraway 88. For other, similar discussions of the temptation of turning an identification with marginal voices into a covert subjugation of them by their supposed champions, see bell hooks, ‘Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness’, FST 157-8, and Uma Naraya, ‘The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist’, FST 218-21.

¹⁷ Besides Graham Ward’s discussion of the theory, feminist standpoint epistemology figures significantly in the work of Pamela Sue Anderson. See her book *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, specifically the second chapter; and ‘An Epistemological-Ethical Approach to Philosophy of Religion: Learning to Listen’, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings*, eds. Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack 94-5.

¹⁸ See, again, the last section of Chapter One above.

¹⁹ Anderson’s prioritisation of empathy is noted by Harriet A. Harris, ‘A Theological Approach: Struggling for Truth’, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* 77. See also Anderson ‘An Epistemological-Ethical Approach’ 95.

Haraway's discussion of situated knowledges inspires the use of words like 'topography' and 'mapping'—language of geography and cartography. Similar imagery appears in another feminist philosophical source, from a different location, the works of Michèle Le Doeuff. In her book *Hipparchia's Choice*, Le Doeuff writes of orientation, disorientation and reorientation as philosophical projects. To demonstrate the relationship of these terms, she asks you to imagine yourself as a weary traveller arriving at an Italian city, pulling out a map and proceeding to figure out directions to where you want to go. You pick out a landmark to look for along the road you are on, but are disoriented when you cannot find that landmark. Eventually you realise your problem: you have pulled out the wrong map, that of a different Italian city, and your landmark does not exist where you are.²⁰ Le Doeuff shows that it is not just a matter of orienting oneself and one's geographical location by map-reading, you also have to choose the correct map. If you cannot find the correct map, you might have to make it.

Similar to advocates of standpoint theory and situated knowledges, Le Doeuff notes that philosophy is never really disinterested or non-cultural, observing this in the course of investigating the place (or lack of place) of women in the history of the discipline.²¹ But whereas the various feminist standpoint theorists draft principles like 'strong objectivity', presenting the logic ready-made for easy appropriation by others, this does not appear to be Le Doeuff's style; her writing evinces more of a questioning and problematising approach—a Socratic method, one might say—pointing to difficulties presented by systems of seeking knowledge as the difficulties appear.²² Her emphases are different, too. Le Doeuff's observation of the partiality of knowledge, while noticing this as bias and interest, accentuates the idea of partiality as incompleteness. She advocates a philosophy which would 'abandon its wish to be a speculation which leaves no room for a lack of knowledge' and 'cease wishing to mask the incomplete nature of all theorisation'.²³ Alongside this, Le Doeuff underlines a

²⁰ HC 200.

²¹ See 'Long Hair, Short Ideas', PI 100-17, for one instance of this discussion, and HC for another.

²² Fascinatingly, the methods and location of the investigators are different enough that the trajectories of standpoint theorists and Michèle Le Doeuff do not cross in their own works. For all that they are both interested in feminism and the liberation of subjugated voices while alluding to the embodiment of knowledge claims, Le Doeuff does not appear in the index to FST while, likewise, none of the principal theorists behind standpoint epistemology appear in the indices to PI and HC. This separation in itself provides evidence for the situated nature of knowledge.

²³ PI 126 and 118.

notion of philosophy as a collaborative effort. She eschews a construal of philosophy which binds the discipline to eminent philosophers who hand on a complete project to a student, master to apprentice, in favour of philosophy as a collective enterprise ‘which has moved and moves on from age to age, is orientated in different directions, taken up, pursued and redebated, which does not have the strongly structured unity of a tradition...but is not constantly being radically undermined either’.²⁴ Truth and knowledge become shared property.

Le Doeuff’s two emphases have several implications. If philosophy is a collective project which recognises its unfinished nature, then practitioners may drop back as necessary to allow others to step forward—a productive humility-in-the-face-of-truth. With this comes the notion of the ‘heterogeneous genesis’ of anyone doing philosophy—that there is not just one source for a person’s thought and behaviour but many, what Le Doeuff terms the ‘multilinearity’ of one’s existence that comes from a plurality of relationships with family members and friends, with neighbours and strangers, with books and other texts, and with one’s own imagination. Simultaneously, any person goes on to be one of many strands of influence on other people.²⁵ This plays against any notion that philosophy can be an isolated discipline. Instead, philosophy becomes ‘a fellow-traveller of conflicts which arise outside of its realm and which, similarly, will be resolved (if at all) outside it, by means which do not rely upon its inherent power’.²⁶ The search for knowledge exists as an exercise in participation and cooperation. Moreover, under this construal, philosophy and philosophers have fewer problems accepting knowledge and wisdom which is not traditionally philosophical. During a discussion of the achievements of the movement for women’s liberation in France despite its variety and theoretical incoherence, Le Doeuff tells how

²⁴ HC 204. Le Doeuff’s critique of the personalisation of philosophy can be found in PI 117-20 and 126-7, and HC 201-5. Note that Le Doeuff does not deny that the person of the philosopher has a role in the pursuit of the discipline—she notes that one is ‘obliged to establish a harmony between the person one is and what one writes’ and admits the truthfulness of a teacher who once told her that ‘you will teach not with what you know but with what you are’ (HC 159 and 201). The problem lies in making this personal nature of philosophy the basis for a master-pupil relationship which preserves philosophy’s special nature, making philosophers, in their possession of wisdom, ontologically better than those who are not philosophers. When this is tied to an ideal of a singular truth and the notion that the finding of this truth by a philosopher can be completed, it results in the possibility that one particular philosopher is all that is needed for a philosophical truth-project in any one age, making everyone else (especially people on the margins) superfluous.

²⁵ HC 170-2.

²⁶ PI 118.

When one thinks one has been trained in ‘rigour’, which, in principle, forbids one from advancing something which has not yet been entirely thought through and well-founded, the discovery that whispered, impressionistic stories and openly subjective viewpoints can lead the way to an understanding of the most vital things is a real lesson, which I have not yet fully integrated, but which teaches the following: it is better to allow yourself to start speaking before being completely sure that you can justify what you say; otherwise, you will never speak at all.²⁷

Le Doeuff opens the way for speculation at the same time that she provides a foundation for interdisciplinarity. Philosophy, as the search for the best way of thinking, becomes a risky venture, trusting in others; but this makes it creative, too.²⁸

Were any theological project to pick up and try to incorporate the suggestions of these various feminist philosophies which highlight the partiality and situated nature of knowledge, adding to that the importance of cooperation in the work that the project is attempting, the ramifications might go a long way towards keeping particular, concrete, and material bodies in mind. Certainly, to me, these epistemologies imply that the four views of the body on which I have focused do not have to eliminate one another; the incompleteness of knowing means that Ward’s malleable body, Hauerwas’s story-formed body, Althaus-Reid’s indecent body, and Ricoeur’s story-making body abide in proximity to one another, moving closer together or farther apart depending on needs and desires that are not altogether predictable, each of them proclaiming some aspect of truth. Additionally, especially with Le Doeuff’s work that demonstrates the significance of creative imagination not only for inspiring philosophy, but also for the precise form in which philosophers work out their thoughts in writing, these theoretical conceptions make space for thinking of disciplines such as philosophy and theology as arts, as practices of creative writing, as places where materiality and form matter—where bodies matter—in the goals which the disciplines pursue.

But there is still more.

²⁷ HC 221.

²⁸ Le Doeuff writes of philosophy as an ‘action’, something which appears when ‘people get to grips with the fringe of unknowing which borders every field of knowledge and overflows from it’ (HC 175). It seems to me that ‘fringe of unknowing’ has similar implications for other disciplines, including theology; limitations to what is known mean that room for creative reflection exists. Of course, theology and philosophy are different precisely at the point that Le Doeuff notes in a quotation above—philosophy does not have ‘the strongly structured unity of a tradition’ while theology of any faith does involve traditions. But one does not have to construe tradition as being without variation or newness; a living tradition evolves according to circumstance and personal relations.

At the end of ‘Vision’, a short story by Alistair MacLeod, the narrator connects his reflections upon the story he has just told to a recollection of something he and a friend used to do when they were boys:

And when the wet ropes of the lobster traps came out of the sea, we would pick out a single strand and then try to identify it some few feet further on. It was difficult to do because of the twisting and turning of the different strands within the rope. Difficult to be ever certain of our judgements or to fully see or understand. Difficult then to see and understand the twisted strands within the rope. And forever difficult to see and understand the tangled twisted strands of love.²⁹

The narrator wonders at the unfathomable nature of human relationships, the twist and tangle of how people interact, noting how certain aspects rise into sight at certain times and places before disappearing again. Not that the strands are unknowable, but their place is determined by their relationship with other strands—and that relationship is ever in flux.

When Michèle Le Doeuff writes about maps and reorientation, she notes that the process is not only a question of figuring where you are; it is also about where you want to go and how to get there. She notes that ‘the precise space of reference’ is also ‘the space of a projected journey’ and that the movement to reorient oneself involves ‘the recognition of how the precise space connects to the intention of travelling’.³⁰ But this is a question fraught with perils. It is not always easy to figure out where you want to go. As noted above, Le Doeuff herself observes that you have to have the right map. And bodies, though present, are not always readily visible—yet we know they are there, we know from our bodies and from those around us, from the stories we tell and the stories we hear. Mapping out where we want to go in addition to where we have already been requires more than just theory. It demands the complexities of choice.

This directs us to the second part of my inquiry into discerning the body, where I start to try to map bodies in relationship, to plot those ‘tangled twisted strands of love’.

²⁹ Alistair MacLeod, ‘Vision’ 167.

³⁰ HC 203.

Part Two

Prelude



Bodies wait.

They wait in morgues, in tombs, in hidden graves, for their secrets to be untangled. They wait behind doors, too, in closets and in beds, by telephone receivers, in doctors' offices and bank queues, for secrets to be played out, not only for others but by those others. Bodies wait for their reflections to form in the eyes of a lover, a brother, a colleague, a killer.

Bodies wait to be read, and for their own stories to be told. Bodies wait to be told and to tell, to relate themselves to others, for others. They narrate the landscape, scratching notes in the margins, colouring outside the lines, leaving pieces behind, residue not only on the surface of the earth, but on the skin of another person, on the vellum of their memories and dreams. Bodies resist subsumption by classification, into doctrine, into being nothing more than the lesser term in a metaphor; their stories remain open, to tell another chapter, or to be part of someone else's unfolding narrative.

Sometimes, though, you cannot wait; you go looking for other bodies to tell you the truth, go looking for ways to learn about yourself and those you hold dear. Sometimes you need to go where the past has written on your flesh, make yourself vulnerable to contact with others, to try to find a future. The story of your body in company with others is a risky tale of discovery. Thus, we turn to the story of Anil Tissera, going home to expose the truth of bodies, thinking, perhaps, that old bones lie still. Learning a little of what happens in the complicated tangle of touch made by the contingencies of bodies whose stories wind together even for the shortest of moments.

Bodies await us.

Chapter Five

The Bodies that Remain:
Anil's Ghost
and
'This sweet touch from the world'



Michael Ondaatje's novel, *Anil's Ghost*, declares the truthful witness of bodies. However, just as bodies are not simple, neither is this witness. Set in the midst of Sri Lanka's civil wars, the story follows Anil, a forensic anthropologist, as she returns to the land of her birth to aid in human-rights efforts to document atrocities perpetrated by rebels, insurgents and government forces alike. She reads what has happened to people from their remains: bones are her text. Beside her works a Sri Lankan archaeologist, Sarath, who reconstructs the past from ruins, stone and ancient inscriptions. For such vocations as theirs, artefacts seem incontrovertible evidence for establishing the reality of what has happened. Yet, the reading of any artefact, whether human tissue or human made, is an act of interpretation. In the face of human wounding and human relationship, in painful and joyful interaction, this reading of forensic and archaeological records becomes destabilised. In *Anil's Ghost*, what seems like a straightforward scientific investigation of bodies is revealed to be complicated not only by the politics of crisis but also by the messiness of personal stories playing out in relationships. Although the attempt to read the truth from bodies is never dismissed, it remains an attempt that cannot be completely accomplished. Clarity is muddled by love and emotion, which hinders the efforts to interpret the truth from bodies and remains. But the bodies do remain—not just the corpses that are being investigated but the bodies of the living, too—and they all give witness: only this witness is borne less in scientific enquiry and more in the touch between people. Touch defines bodies, their stories, the shape of the stories. Yet, this is not a simple definition: touch does not have only one signification. Here bodies interact with both love and fury, to create and to destroy. Sometimes the love destroys and the fury creates. Still, touch gives the possibility of life, the call back to the possibility, the truthful witness of story to memory, to human being. Touch calls back to the fullness of being alive and of having known others, attended to others. In the end, there remains 'This sweet touch from the world.'¹

Anil's Ghost tells the story of people caught up in war and crisis through bodies, and thus its pages are full of images and motifs of bodies. There are dead bodies and body parts; there are the bodies of those whose stories are being told, and who are witnessing the stories of others around them. There are representations of bodies:

¹ AG 307.

ancient carvings, modern Buddhas, references to films and photographs. In this chapter, however, I concentrate on picking out just a few of these threads that weave through the complex structure of the novel. I begin with the way Ondaatje portrays the reading of bodies through other bodies, the interplay of flesh and word. I then examine how these readings become problematised. Finally, I turn to the touch that remains.

The Truth of Bodies

After Anil begins her work in Sri Lanka, she and Sarath discover more-recent skeletons among ancient ones at an archaeological site. Because access to the site is restricted to government workers, Anil realises that these bodies could prove the existence of human rights abuses in the country. One of the skeletons is complete, including a skull; they name the remains ‘Sailor’. Using her forensic skills, Anil sets out to determine what happened to the person whose bones they have:

She began to examine the skeleton again under sulphur light, summarizing the facts of his death so far, the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy. One forearm broken. Partial burning. Vertebrae damage in the neck. The possibility of a small bullet wound in the skull. Entrance and exit.

She could read Sailor’s last actions by knowing the wounds on bone. He puts his arms up over his face to protect himself from the blow. He is shot with a rifle, the bullet going through his arm, then into the neck. While he is on the ground, they come up and kill him.²

Anil reads events as they have been inscribed on the body: the bones become her text. They are ‘facts’ and ‘permanent truths’. Once the remains have been uncovered, the assaults that the person has suffered cannot be imagined away. Physical attacks leave physical traces which tell a clear story to one who is trained to read them, one who has a hermeneutical skill learned not unlike the gaining of a language. The body carries a story with it because that story has been physically impressed upon it.

Still, the impression left upon human remains does not necessarily come from traumatic sources. The book talks also of ‘markers of occupation’ which are signs of what the person did in life, stresses caused by habitual movements and poses which can reveal identity by determining the vocation or avocation of the deceased.³ In actuality,

² AG, 64-5.

³ AG 177.

Anil's forensic reading of a body does not begin with possible perpetrators, but with the victim. We are told that

The central truism in her work was that you could not find a suspect until you found the victim. And in spite of their knowledge that Sailor had probably been killed in this district, in spite of details of age and posture, her theorizing of height and weight, in spite of the "head composition" that she had not much faith in, it seemed unlikely that they would identify him; they still knew nothing about the world that Sailor had come from.

And, in any case, if they did identify him, if they did discover the details of his murder, what then? He was a victim among thousands. What would this change?

She remembered Clyde Snow, her teacher in Oklahoma, speaking about human rights work in Kurdistan: *One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims.* She and Sarath both knew that in all the turbulent history of the island's recent civil wars, in all the token police investigations, not one murder charge had been made during the troubles. But this could be a clear case against the government.⁴

In order for the work to mean anything—to the international community, to any human rights committee—they would have to be able to tell the history of at least one person who was lost. Thus they marshal all the scientific evidence that they can, from soil samples to bone analysis to forensic entomology. They also get a recommended local artist, Ananda, to reconstruct the head from the skull. Interestingly, the words of Anil's teacher also point to what the book itself is doing: if 'One victim can speak for many victims', then one story can speak for many stories. Though readers might presume that *Anil's Ghost* assumes a cause-and-effect order for politics and war and the involvement of people, the novel is less concerned with the cause than with the effect. There is no attempt to explain the wars, just to describe life in such a time and, through the portrait made, to witness to the truth.

As mentioned, the skills which Anil uses are like a language. To be more exact, the skills are closer akin to palaeography. Ondaatje makes this explicit by having a forensic anthropologist work with an archaeologist whose mentor had been a self-described epigraphist. Even though Sarath himself declares early on that he finds the pairing 'odd', the kinds of intuition used by both professions, and the skills with remains, are similar.⁵ Later, Sarath's brother, Gamini the doctor, makes the connection

⁴ AG 176.

⁵ AG 17.

explicit when he talks about Sarath's former teacher's skill at reading carved texts. 'A skill...to decipher inscriptions,' Gamini says. 'Wonderful! To study history as if it were a body.'⁶ Gamini's words turn artefact into body, implying obliquely that the stone with its inscriptions is in some way alive or once was. In any case, the two interpretive disciplines lie closer than one might have expected. Both read the marks on a tissue of surface, the writing that makes a text by its presence. In both disciplines, the definition of an object's importance comes from the act of that object being marked.⁷

What binds Anil the forensic anthropologist and Sarath the archaeologist is a mutual desire for reconstruction. At one point, Anil, musing about her co-worker, considers how

His desire, he had told her, was to write a book someday about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed. Not a wall of it remained, but he wanted to tell the story of that place. It would emerge out of this dark trade with the earth, his knowledge of the region in chronicles—its medieval business routes, its presence as a favourite monsoon town of a certain king, as revealed in poems that celebrated the city's daily life.⁸

Sarath wants to uncover the lives that have been buried; he wants to tell the story of a place in order to bring its memory to life, and thus resurrect its society in the memories of present-day people. The story itself would be spun from material memory, from the detritus that has been left behind from long-ago human lives. Sarath desires to bring the past to light using a physical hermeneutic.⁹

Carvings, inscriptions, old ruins: they all take on a certain lushness in *Anil's Ghost*. They are palpable histories, frozen expressions from the past, words that are embodied in material signs so that their utterance is less ephemeral. If the reading of such signs is like the skill at reading human remains forensically, even so are the two

⁶ AG 193.

⁷ The way Ondaatje presents the body as a surface on which identifying stories may be read is quite similar to Paul Ricoeur's notion of the body as that which makes the interior of oneself knowable to others. See FM 19-20, as well as my discussion of this in Chapter Four. This construal of the body's connection with others may also be compared to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'chiasmic body' in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: basic writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin 247-71.

⁸ AG 29-30.

⁹ Cf. the other two Canadian novels which I am examining in this thesis, Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass* and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*. Both of these join *Anil's Ghost* in involving in their subject matter some form of reflection upon the reconstruction of a vanished past. The other two novels I study reflect less and attempt more reconstruction within the body of their texts.

texts of flesh and stone aligned by Ondaatje. In a passage on Palipana, Sarath's teacher, Ondaatje writes that

He spread his fingers over every discovered rune. He traced each letter on the Stone Book on Polonnaruwa, a boulder carved into a rectangle four feet high, thirty feet long, the first book of the country, laid his bare arms against this plinth that collected the heat of the day. For most of the year it was dark and only during the monsoons would the letters be filled with water, creating small, perfectly cut harbours, as at Carthage. A giant book in the scrub grass of the Sacred Quadrangle of Polonnaruwa, chiselled with letters, bordered by a frieze of ducks. Ducks for eternity, he whispered to himself, having pieced together what he had picked up in an ancient text. A secret.¹⁰

It is not 'eyes' that decipher the runes; instead, they are 'traced' by 'fingers' and embraced by 'arms'. Body and inscription entwine; they read each other. Their physical natures, interacting, create worlds—or, perhaps, the representations of worlds, with the encounter of human body and archaeological record becoming a geographical tableau, reminiscent of a three-dimensional map. Reading this map is revelation, is the learning of a secret.¹¹

But if flesh and stone lie so close together, if one can read history like a body or divine the truth of an event from human remains, then all of these stand open to the same difficulties. Texts shift, and are lost. Evidence may not be enough to prove a truth. Interpretation is fraught with personal elements that change the understanding of any signification. Ondaatje hints at such problems, at instability in the process of reading, from the start of the novel. *Anil's Ghost* begins with warnings about the truth-seeking effort. First, Ondaatje presents a memory that Anil has from her time doing human-rights work in Guatemala. She and others return to a dig at a mass burial site to find a woman sitting in the grave, staring at two bodies that lie side-by-side. They could be her missing husband and her missing brother. The author declares that

*There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman's face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers.*¹²

¹⁰ AG 83.

¹¹ In correspondence to this image of a meeting that creates something new, cf. Paul Ricoeur's notion of metaphor in which the meeting of two terms creates a new reality. See Ricoeur, 'Word, Polysemy, Metaphor', RR, 65-85, and *The Rule of Metaphor*, passim, but particularly the section 'Towards the Concept of "Metaphorical Truth"', 247-56.

¹² AG 6. Italics in original.

Ondaatje warns the reader that the book moves around and among the indescribable. The remains themselves, the remnants of bodies, lie inert; they depend upon the bodies of others to give them meaning through attending to them, through becoming aware of their significance. This attending itself cannot be contained. It may be glanced at, hinted at, but the scientific fact itself just points to it.¹³

Shortly after this, a second passage reminds the reader of the fragile nature of the archaeological record left by human history. The passage describes a cave in China which once sheltered sacred Buddhist art. However, upon discovering the site an archaeologist plundered it, carving out the stone Bodhisattvas, dismembering them and dispersing them to museums around the world. The story of the cave is mentioned as told in a lecture:

‘Nothing lasts,’ Palipana told them. ‘It is an old dream. Art burns, dissolves. And to be loved with the irony of history—that isn’t much.’ He said this in his first class to his archaeology students. He had been talking about books and art, about the ‘ascendancy of the idea’ being often the only survivor.¹⁴

Artefacts can only be the partial remains of any society, and what does remain easily crumbles away. If the idea is all that is left, then the past is not recovered: the idea ascended is not the same as it was. Not only that, but far worse it is that those who love the past also destroy it; bringing artefacts into the light allows the items to inform the present-day world, but also imperils their integrity. Ondaatje heightens the pain of this by deliberately highlighting the bodily nature of the carvings in his description. It is not simply stone that is fragmented, but ‘[h]eads separated from bodies’ and ‘[h]ands broken off’.¹⁵ This echoes the violence done to human beings, to flesh, in war. This also suggests that, while archaeology and other readings seek truth, seek facts, such readings themselves carry a potential for violence.¹⁶

¹³ Ondaatje’s destabilisation of the reading of bodies is reminiscent of John D. Caputo’s complaint against the phenomenologists that their meaning-making and -imparting bodies are always whole and perfect, always able to communicate in their ‘propriety’, while real bodies are most often broken and malformed, and that this makes the idea that all can be learned by touch unachievable. See *Against Ethics* 195-6.

¹⁴ AG 12. Italics in original.

¹⁵ AG 12.

¹⁶ Caputo, in the chapter of *Against Ethics* called ‘Jewgreek Bodies: An Antiphenomenological Supplement to the Lyrical-Philosophical Discourses’, has much to say about broken and disease-ridden bodies, but quite little about the potentiality of violence in human attempts to read the truth in one another. When Caputo does talk about potential for violence, he makes this a function of the

All the way through the narrative, then, the search for truth on which the two main characters embark is rendered problematic and destabilised. Stone crumbles; history, stories, memories, lives get buried. Even when Ondaatje has a character proclaim faith in the forensic exercise, he uses allusion to undercut the certainty. When Anil talks of the facts of death as ‘permanent truths’ (as discussed above), she says that these truths are the ‘same for Colombo as for Troy’.¹⁷ Why Troy? It is one of the most famous ancient places and like Colombo a location of conflict and violence. The quest to find the site of the ancient city forms part of the epic story of modern archaeology. Yet, the desire to locate Troy was fuelled by the literature that made it significant, which made the name known to history: Homer’s *Iliad*. Only the discovery of a place which could be called Troy can do nothing to verify the events of Homer’s epic. One might say that the truth of the story remains. But Troy was destroyed; its citizens speak barely in whispers. The permanence of these truths is elusive. If it is the same for Colombo as it is for Troy, then for Colombo the truth is bound up in unverifiable stories, too.

Ondaatje also portrays both Anil and Sarath as doubtful of their own enterprise at times. The reader expects Anil to be idealistic, the activist hoping that her work will give a foundation for civil rights to be re-established. Yet, she labours under no illusions that the wounds of atrocity can simply be made better or erased—that her work at naming unidentified remains and discerning the circumstances of their death could heal completely the people who had lost loved ones. Ondaatje writes that

She used to believe that meaning allowed a person to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection for the self. They held on to just the coloured and patterned sarong a missing relative last slept in, which in normal times would have become a household rag but now was sacred.¹⁸

response of the strong to the powers of obligation and solicitation emitted by the weak or marginalised Other (215). (Interestingly enough, it is always the Other who is marginalised in *Against Ethics*.) The violence depicted is intentional, forming an attempt to stop that solicitation which haunts the self faced by the Other. Ondaatje, however, points to a less intentional violence that happens simply by trying to communicate and to learn, an obliterating gaze coming from the invasion of good intentions. Caputo’s critique of the phenomenological meeting of bodies and sense could have been filled out by reflection upon the violent potentialities inherent in the propriety of Merleau-Ponty’s presentation of the visible body. See Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 201, and Merleau-Ponty, *Basic Writings*, 251-7, where he brings the tangible and the visible together so that vision is a kind of touching.

¹⁷ AG 64.

¹⁸ AG 55-6.

Meaning was not, then, for survivors themselves. They had loss; they had the hole made when someone you love is torn away from you, leaving you clinging to bare—physical, but bare—tokens of that life. Truth uncovered cannot fill that hole. However, this does not mean that the work is worthless. Anil's struggle is the work of mitigation, a quest to release a population from the grips of fear so that grief can go on naturally. She continues to strive to undo the 'scarring psychosis', as it is described, so that fewer people will have to experience the pain.¹⁹

Of course, Anil has been away, learning her skills in the wider world. Sarath has lived through the crisis, continuing to do his archaeological work even as society devolved around him. He ponders 'discoveries made during the worst political times', thinking of an episode when he and his teacher had gone into a cave with a makeshift torch to view carvings while all along unknown attackers were picking up people for no apparent reason, making them disappear; he reflects how '[h]alf the world, it felt, was being buried, the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush'.²⁰ He asks the question, 'what would the truth bring them into?' and answers himself: 'It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol'.²¹ As far as Sarath has seen, the truth has the capacity to beget violence by adding fuel to the cycle of vengeance. All that the truth would do would be to allow the justification of one's violence against another. Thus, while he worked to uncover the past and give it life anew, Sarath observed that the living world around him was burying itself, in making people disappear, in murder and the hiding of bodies.²² Here turmoil pushes life below the surface, and truth is in the act of submergence.²³

While Anil and Sarath apparently cling to different ways to think about the consequences of truth, both have a very similar idea of what makes truth. For them it is always *the* truth, composed of the facts of what really happened. The truth is the reality which, when hidden, can be excavated by skilful techniques, similar to the way a reader

¹⁹ AG 56.

²⁰ AG 156.

²¹ AG 156.

²² AG 157.

²³ Cf. the submerging of the body into the flesh in Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 208-12. Contingencies that act against the 'agent body' force a 'reduction' to flesh, which Caputo sees as an anarchy which contracts the world into vulnerability, turning people from those who act to those who are acted upon.

reaches meaning by interpreting a collection of lines and dots which have marked up a surface. They have an overtly hermeneutical approach to truth, and seek to work by a type of exegesis. When they question truth, or the finding of it, Anil and Sarath actually question only the application of truth. Yet Ondaatje does not allow his characters to face truth so easily, and hints that the reader should be suspicious, too. You may see this, for instance, in the event of the reconstruction of the head of Sailor from the skull. After much struggle Ananda finishes his work and Sarath and Anil go to view the sculpted head. At first, Anil registers a sense of wonder at the revelation of this person whose bones she had been addressing: it is ‘As if she was finally meeting a person who had been described to her in letters, or someone she had once lifted up as a child who was now an adult’.²⁴ She finds herself surprised also by the ‘serenity’ and the lack of tension, that it is ‘A face comfortable with itself’.²⁵ But Sarath declares that the peacefulness is the problem, because it is ‘what [the artist] wants of the dead’.²⁶ He reveals to Anil that Ananda’s own wife was among the disappeared, that for three years he has not found her, that the sculpted head is peaceful because that is the only way Ananda can deal with the loss of his wife—by imagining her peaceful in death.²⁷ They realise that the head is ‘not a reconstruction of Sailor’s face’, regardless of all the work, the artistic technique, that had gone into it.²⁸ This realisation is, in a way, a crisis of truth. The reconstruction of the past, which began as the step to follow excavation, carries with it the creativity of the art, a multiplication of the truth that does not simply establish reality but adds to it.²⁹

²⁴ AG 184.

²⁵ AG 184.

²⁶ AG 184.

²⁷ AG 185.

²⁸ AG 188.

²⁹ Cf. Ricoeur, ‘The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality’, RR, 130: ‘The thesis which I want to elaborate here, and incorporate within the problematic of fiction, is that images created by the talent of the artist are not less real but more real because they *augment* reality’.

The Truth of the Surgeon's Scalpel

The destabilisation continues with the addition of Sarath's brother, Gamini, to the story. Gamini is a surgeon who has found himself dealing with all the trauma to the human body that modern war can create—what happens when hot metal and explosives meet flesh. The doctor's job is to read a body yet another way: not forensically or archaeologically, but through diagnosis. From the signs written—the wounds inflicted or incised—the doctor reads the state of the flesh, determines what needs to be done to save: that is, the doctor determines what might be done, what may or may not be possible. Gamini's practice of this medical reading leads him, on the one hand, to dispute the idea of finding a truthful answer, to reject the idea that one side or another is in the right.³⁰ The narrator tells us how the onset of civil violence changed the outlook of Gamini from his early days as a doctor in his first posting: 'In one of the hospital texts that the young doctor Gamini read was a sentence he became excessively fond of: *In diagnosing a vascular injury, a high index of suspicion is necessary.*'³¹ Though the medical text almost certainly refers to suspicion concerning the injury—about where the most pressing harm to the body has actually been done—this 'high index of suspicion' extends to the doctor's approach to the human beings around him as possible perpetrators who write their desires so violently upon the flesh of others.

On the other hand, Gamini does see truth in the practice of healing, a practice in response to wounding or illness. Although truthful answers may evade the diagnosis of the cause of any injury, mending the injury is either successful or not. While Gamini asserts that his failed marriage and his brother's research mean nothing, he implies that medicine—his work, and not his familial identity—is the only thing that has meaning.³² The struggle to preserve life acts as a protest against the inhumanity of political violence. The novel recounts an incident when Gamini is involved in a difficult operation on the heart of a young boy to repair a congenital defect. During the operation, the wounded from an attacked village begin to stream into the hospital, but Gamini refuses to stop tending to the boy: he 'was not going to leave him alone, betray

³⁰ AG 119.

³¹ AG 118. Italics in original.

³² AG 132.

him in his sleep'.³³ That beautiful boy had potential, the possibility of life in the face of terrible bloodshed. What other truth could there be, Gamini's character asks, both of Sarath and of Anil, as if the truths which they seek to reconstruct from the past mean nothing for the innocents who need saving.³⁴

Still, the opposition of the caring profession of Gamini to the more scientific callings of the anthropologist and the archaeologist is not stable. Ondaatje refuses to let the doctor get the upper hand. Although it appears that the medical touch champions a truth which seeks out the human and denies the political, the novel asks the reader to look more carefully. Gamini, the caring doctor, does not want to know the stories of the people whom he treats. He likes how the wounded come in and are sorted not by any other history but that of their injuries. The doctors and nurses tag these patients by what sort of treatment they need; names only come later, for records.³⁵ When Gamini has to examine the photographs of bodies that have been found, so that he can make reports for Amnesty International, he covers the faces, refers to the bodies only by the number of their file, concentrates on the wounds. He does not want to recognise anyone, to know them in the way that comes when you know a name. Eventually those who send him the photographs from the morgue learn to cover the faces themselves.³⁶ While the doctor's reluctance to have much to do with the dead is in part a grasp at life, it is also a denial of the particular lives of those who have been killed. Their stories are reduced to the wounds which they have suffered.

Part of this has to do with Gamini's own character. His family had called him the Mouse when he was growing up, because he had been quiet, observant, the youngest who was never really the centre of attention. He was 'invisible'.³⁷ As an adult, he maintains 'distance and anonymity', prefers strangers to the intimacy of family and

³³ AG 241.

³⁴ Cf. Caputo's criticism of phenomenologists, philosophical ethicists and theologians vs. practitioners of lyrical-philosophy, with the latter being more open to obligation's call to attend to the Other in need, implying that the former group does not heed the call or consider it part of the search for truth. Gamini seems to suggest something similar about the academic, post-mortem investigations of Sarath and Anil.

³⁵ AG 125-6.

³⁶ AG 212-3.

³⁷ AG 221-3.

friends.³⁸ His professional life as a doctor in the midst of war serves only to increase his distance from others: ‘His duties made him come upon strangers and cut them open without ever knowing their names.... It seemed he did not approach people unless they had a wound, even if he couldn’t see it’.³⁹ He knows the intimacy of bodies, the intricate inner workings of organs, bones, and nerves, but that intimacy only masks emotional distance. Ondaatje writes of Gamini that ‘it was his own heart that could not step into the world’.⁴⁰ His life is in stasis, moving on the edge of sleep and waking but never fully awake or at rest. Even the truth of injured flesh and medical treatment which he holds up against the truth of judgement and law is not truth enough to make him fully alive.⁴¹

In the end, bodies are just as much artefacts for Gamini as carvings are for his brother, and just as much an encoded text to be deciphered as they are for Anil. What difference does it make that the bodies with which he concerns himself are still alive, that the possibility for physical repair might remain? For all three of them, Anil and the brothers, truth waits to be discerned—to be read using the techniques of their profession. These are techniques of professional touch to be precise. What is written on the body is the sign of the truth that has happened to the body, a truth which has been inflicted, exacted, carved into, inscribed or authored by someone else. Those with the professional touch read these signs with their fingers, looking for the truth behind them. However, *Anil’s Ghost* places this hermeneutical approach to seeking the truth beside other narrative elements which critique and destabilise its certainty. The truthful witness of bodies which Anil and Sarath seek is problematised by the slippage and erosion of the past, by the physical erosion of evidence and the instability of memory. Their precise, scientific touch upon their body of evidence stands alongside the different truth which emerges from the artist Ananda’s personal reconstruction of the skeleton’s head. The medical reading of Gamini questions the work of Sarath and Anil but in turn is

³⁸ AG 224.

³⁹ AG 211.

⁴⁰ AG 248.

⁴¹ Considering n. 34 above, Ondaatje’s deconstruction of Gamini’s seeming humanitarianism might also give Caputo’s readers pause. Is heeding the call of obligation enough? As Gamini shows outward signs of response to obligation may not demonstrate an actual vulnerability of oneself to another. More than action, some relationship is needed, and this is not guaranteed. Yet, perhaps responding to obligation allows for the possibility for the defences of the stoniest, most guarded of hearts to crumble.

questioned by Gamini's distance and inability to recognise the particular human stories of the victims of violence whom he treats. The novel as a whole provides a constellation of readings which refuse any claim that one specific gaze possesses the truth. As the plot unfolds, finding truth becomes increasingly complicated. When Anil and Sarath succeed in identifying the skeleton they find and learn what happened to the man, their project unravels; political forces end their partnership and all the scientific evidence which Anil has gathered is ignored. Technique alone cannot withstand the oppressive violence which acts to diminish social humanity.

A Truthfulness of Touching Bodies

Still, although *Anil's Ghost* subverts the certainty of the truthful witness of bodies as read by the professional, technical touch, that is not the only type of touch that the novel portrays. Intertwined with the technical touch are instances of a more personal touch which provides a relational reading of bodies. The flux of touching, the way contact unfolds over time: this fluidity of the body in relationship defines a personal truth—not a truth that is necessarily subjective and hence unreliable, but a truth that radiates from the entirety of a person's being. This personal truth is read in relationship, defined by the ways that the edges of one person meet those of another.⁴² In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje presents a body's truthful witness in the way it contacts other bodies. The outline of meetings of flesh-and-bone persons incorporates the shape of the story.

This witness remains a palpable if fluid truth. It is performative. The characters enact truth, and the descriptions of their touching become the witnesses which define meaning in the story. While the technical touch strives to read a body, construing that body as an instrument to find truth, the personal touch proclaims a participation of bodies in the witness that they give: the bodies themselves are the truth. When all the techniques for reading and interpreting truth are not enough, the touch itself remains. This does not mean that no 'reading' or interpretation of the body occurs, only that the

⁴² See CC 66-74, on the personal nature of touch, which he argues involves the intimation of 'relational difference' in a way that corporeal boundaries do not just come into contact but that a person reaches across those boundaries, affirming the existence of the other's individual self. Ward's discussion includes a critique of Merleau-Ponty for not realising that touching one's own body brings no intimation. Ward's discussion of touch here, beginning with the healing touch of Jesus, is quite comprehensive in its focus of the positive, generous aspects of touch in making people present to one another. For a different take on touch, see Gabriel Josipovici, *Touch*.

witness which is being portrayed by the touch is not reducible to the knowledge which is gained from a reading of the marks inscribed on one body or another. The witness is more descriptive than prescriptive, but not only descriptive, for the touch prescribes itself—touch circumscribes a body, and to circumscribe a form is also to construct it. The personal touch orients a relationship to the world, and connotes the nature of that relationship.

Yet, as Ondaatje spins his tale, he refuses a simple finality even to this answer. The incidents of touch in the novel reflect life in all of its chaotic messiness; that is, the touch depicted is not one-dimensionally good.⁴³ Ondaatje does not present touch as always being creative, constructive, helpful and nurturing. For instance, the plotline recounting the story of Anil's affair with the married Cullis reveals that the relationship ended in a desert motel room when he refused to let her go and she stabbed him in the arm with a knife.⁴⁴ That contact sums up all the secret intimacy of their relationship, the souring of joy, and the unhealthy nature of their hold on each other. This glimpse at the intimate history of a protagonist also echoes the violence which reverberates throughout the novel's landscape. For most of the novel, the protagonists deal with the consequences of violence, with reading the wounds on the body. However, this builds to the one direct description of an act of violence as part of Sri Lanka's civil war, the suicide bombing in Colombo that killed the country's president. Here the touch of one body upon another defines the ultimate move of desiring power over the other: the obliteration of all definition, the annihilation of bodies. As Ondaatje describes it, because of security, the bomber

had to approach [the president] in a public place, with all the paraphernalia of devastation sewn onto himself. He was not just the weapon but the aimer of it. The bomb would destroy whomever he was facing. His own eyes and frame were the cross-hairs.⁴⁵

⁴³ Along with Caputo's presentation of touch in 'Jewgreek Bodies', *Against Ethics*, the potential negativity of touch in *Anil's Ghost* is very different from most theologians and phenomenologists of touch, e.g. Ward, who seems only to skirt the violent possibilities of touch. When Ward does discuss negative possibilities involved with touch, he concentrates on the fact that distance is not always bridged by intimacy, and on the fear that one might either be absorbed by the other or not integrated. There is little mention of any touch which might be bodily destructive, suggesting that the discussion mainly remains at the level of the ideal, while Ondaatje strives to evoke complexity.

⁴⁴ AG 100-1.

⁴⁵ AG 293-4.

Here is the intimacy of violence, an orientation of the body towards another for the express purpose of a touch which obliterates. For the bomber, all is concentrated in direction, like the force of an arrow heading to its target; he has no other answer to the truth, whatever his truth might be. To a certain extent, this contact represents the ultimate failure of the professional touch's hermeneutical search for truth, for there will not be enough remains to read. The writing on the body in this case totally overwrites the page so that all is marked, all incised, and no surface survives. But, of course, the novel does not end there.⁴⁶

In the face of violence, there is another type of touch which *Anil's Ghost* catalogues. Beginning with the woman sitting in a grave in Guatemala, the image of familial tenderness recurs constantly. A mother holds a child, a brother tends a brother. Sarath recalls a rock carving of 'a single line depicting a woman's back bent over a child'.⁴⁷ The carving records tenderness in stone, yet the timbre of this tenderness remains ambiguous. Sarath

remembered how they had stood before it in the flickering light, Palipana's arm following the line of the mother's back bowed in affection or grief. An unseen child. All the gestures of motherhood harnessed. A muffled scream in her posture.⁴⁸

The strength of the carved line lies in the emotions which it conveys, but the specificity of those emotions is either hidden or indistinguishable. That is, grief and love wind around one another: it is love that enables grief at an absence, while great grief signifies great love for the one who has been lost. Because of this ambiguity, the artwork can evoke joy and sorrow, perhaps even simultaneously. Just as the carving encapsulates a relationship between mother and child, the image of familial tenderness encapsulates the complexity of touch in Ondaatje's novel. This leaves much for the reader to decide.

⁴⁶ It is not only that there are nurturing touches and destructive ones, though: that is too black-and-white. There are also depictions of touch that is ineffectual in the face of the breakdown or limitations of the body. For example, the reader learns at interludes of the fading of Anil's relationship with the woman Leaf, eventually discovering that their pulling apart comes from Leaf's personal disintegration as Alzheimer's destroys her memory. Here no amount of touch can undo the loss done to the body; the distance between friends can only grow ever larger. This ebbing away of meaning from touch is depicted as being just as bad as sudden violence.

⁴⁷ AG 156.

⁴⁸ AG 157.

In the grief of love depicted by the image of contact between characters, which demands a stronger hearing, the grief or the love? Can you even have one without the other?⁴⁹

Three particular scenes of touching in *Anil's Ghost* exemplify these questions: Ananda's tenderness towards Anil when she is weeping at the realisation of his loss; the piet  scene between the brothers, Sarath and Gamini; the painting of the Buddha's eyes, ending with that touch of concern from the nephew to Ananda—this sweet touch from the world.⁵⁰ All of these are demonstrations of love wrapped up in grief; yet they may also be read the other way around, as demonstrations of grief wrapped up in love. Indeed, they turn inside-out constantly. Anil's tears flow because she has learned that Ananda's wife is among the disappeared; she had been sceptical of him, scornful of his ability to reconstruct the head, disdainful of his drunkenness, but all of this falls away and cracks open her heart as she wanders too close to his grief. She cries finally for the pain of all the mourners of her homeland, and it is one of them who turns to console her: 'He moved two steps forward and with his thumb creased away the pain around her eyes along with her tears' wetness'.⁵¹ So grief responds to grief, producing a kindness, a moment of love. Gamini's caring pours out of him at the sight of his brother's body, his brother killed presumably by shadowy forces of authority that did not like the way he helped an expatriate anthropologist. Faced with Sarath's still form in the morgue, the doctor does the only thing he knows: 'He could heal his brother, set the left leg, deal with every wound as if he were alive, as if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back into his life'.⁵² Yet this seemingly ineffectual touch speaks

⁴⁹ Cf. SD 63: 'To love as if we'd choose/ even the grief'. This also indicates limitations in Caputo's construal of true fleshly bodies. Against the active, agent bodies of philosophers, Caputo offers jewgreek bodies of flesh, bodies which are smelly, suffering, broken, confused, lost in chaos, encumbering, disintegrating, etc. They are everything that the ideally whole, active bodies are not—and that is the problem. Caputo's jewgreek bodies are the extreme examples of flesh-and-blood unruliness, and only in the sense of pain and physical suffering. He downplays the pleasures of the body, joys and desires; more than this, he does such things as listing 'genital smells' in connection with 'the odors of disease and death' (*Against Ethics*, 204). Even though he avers that the flesh is also the site of 'carnival and carnal joy', almost all of the examples Caputo uses to delineate flesh are decidedly negative. Much of this is probably a matter of rhetorical choice in an attempt to persuade readers. However, it still presents only part of the reality of the flesh. What is missing is what can be seen in *Anil's Ghost* and in Michaels's poem: the presence of tenderness, the mixture of love and grief which coincide with one another. Caputo's jewgreek bodies, in their own way, are as one-dimensional as the bodies he criticises, and unwittingly uphold a binary construction which places degeneracy and deterioration with flesh, and gives little room for an embrace, a kiss, or a caress.

⁵⁰ AG 186-7, 287-90, 305-7.

⁵¹ AG 187.

⁵² AG 287.

the intimacy of brothers in the immediacy of loss. Lastly, Ananda returns to his ritual role as a painter of the eyes of the Buddha; he hangs above the world, looking out and into a mirror, painting the eyes on the great statue. Ananda sees the land from above, sees patterns of wind and weather, of living creatures, all the conflict and struggle minimised in distance. It is ‘a seduction’ as he sees the birds, the ‘tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa [his wife] had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart’.⁵³ He had lived with his loss by imagining the possible peacefulness of his wife’s death, a courageous beauty made mythical, transformed. But his nephew’s touch—a simple touch of concern upon Ananda’s hand—brings the artist back to earth, to the rich depth of love and grief making and supporting the fullness of one another.

In all of these passages, one reading gives way to another. When Anil breaks down in Ananda’s grief, she has been in the midst of judging his reconstruction of the head in her forensic terms. She has ‘felt that she knew every physical aspect about Sailor’, that by reading his life from his bones she has known him, but the liveliness of the sculpted head catches her off-guard.⁵⁴ The simple question of whether the head is a good reconstruction or not, whether it exhibits a fact, no longer suffices. Instead, the head becomes a word about the loss that is inflicted on people when loved ones have been torn from them.⁵⁵ In the morgue, Gamini tries desperately to read his brother like any wounded patient presented to him. He reads childhood scars (which is how he has identified his brother’s body from a photograph) and remembers the stories behind them; he reads what his brother’s killers have done to him.⁵⁶ Yet all the clinical deciphering keeps leading him to the irreducibility of his brother’s death, leading him

⁵³ AG 307.

⁵⁴ AG 183-4.

⁵⁵ When Sarath asked Anil for whom she was weeping, she replied, ‘Ananda, Sailor, their lovers. Your brother working himself to death.’ She was suddenly faced with the ‘mad logic’ of it all, and how there was ‘no resolving’ (AG 184). For all that she seems to have acknowledged the shortcomings of her technical, forensic hermeneutic, to be confronted by the awfulness of human vulnerability was still an affront. At that moment she read the signs left on the world not as markers towards truth but as evocative of truth in their own sadness.

⁵⁶ Among other things, Gamini thought of ‘the gash of a scar on the side of your elbow you got crashing a bike on the Kandy Hill’, responding to his brother as he attended his body (AG 287). He thought of how torturers seek out their victims’ vanities—and so broke the hands of an archaeologist (AG 289-90).

not to the body of a patient but to his own brother, to their relationship which, though never easy, is still the relationship of family. At that instant

Sarath's chest said everything. It was what Gamini had fought against. But now this body lay on the bed undefended. It was what it was. No longer a counter of argument, no longer an opinion that Gamini refused to accept.⁵⁷

The body is no longer a cipher for something else, for a truth to be sought elsewhere; the simple presence and absence of Sarath thwarts Gamini's normal attempt to distance himself by means of a technical touch.

The situation in the passage at the end of the novel with Ananda and his nephew works slightly differently. For one thing, his technical touch is not quite the analytical tool for reading as that employed by either Anil or Gamini (or Sarath, for that matter): his touch and its reading are those of a craftsman. As Ananda oversees the reconstruction of a dynamited statue of the Buddha, he reads the stone fragments like a giant jigsaw puzzle, his touch the artistry of putting pieces in place.⁵⁸ The goal is the artefact, and less what the artefact says. Much of this is also a technical reading—based on the techniques needed to knit the stones together again—as is Ananda's approach to the painting of the eyes on the new statue of the Buddha: only the latter is a technical approach to religion, ritual and tradition, as shown, for example, in the way it is mentioned that Ananda had taken the time the previous day to climb the ladder up against the statue and figure out the most comfortable position for his work.⁵⁹ However, the technical craft involved in Ananda's artistic touch goes further as it puts him in position for the seductive gaze mentioned earlier. Up there, following the sightlines of the Buddha, the temptation is to move from a technical touch towards a totalising, technical vision, objectifying everything and everyone in view.⁶⁰ However, his nephew's touch grounds him again, reminding the reader (and Ananda, perhaps) of the

⁵⁷ AG 289.

⁵⁸ AG 301-4.

⁵⁹ AG 305.

⁶⁰ Compare Donna Haraway's discussion of 'infinite vision' and the 'conquering gaze from nowhere' in 'Situated Knowledges', *FST*. Haraway critiques the infinitely empirical, infinitely objective view that pretends to have transcended its body and not to be seeing with an eye, for this is a view which distances the perceiver from whom and what they are perceiving. Such a theoretical construction of vision lends easily enough to becoming a tool of domination, a way to see over other people. Ondaatje here reminds us that such distance is also dangerous for the one who sees: in itself it is a loss of perspective and a false vision which does not allow you to connect with others and truly live.

creative and relational aspects that go with the technical ones: a different way to read the world.

Because it is not that the new way of reading—the alternative hermeneutic—annuls what comes before it. The technical touch remains; there is still a place for reading the witness of bodies, whether those bodies be bones or stones. What Ondaatje's novel implies, however, is that this technical reading is not all that exists; it does not hold all the truth. Indeed, much of the truth lies in the space between, in the unquantifiable intention and attention of touch between human beings. Without that, the other's witness—or the other's attempt at a truthful witness—can be misleading or incomplete. Any attempt at a definitive truth remains partial, yet the attempt must still be made. One might say that *Anil's Ghost* ends with a turn from strictly truthful witness to faithful witness, and not just the witness that bodies give, but a witness to the body itself, a witness to embodied life, humanity, personhood, relation. Here is a breaking down of witness, of the 'knowing eye'; here is the presentation of the instability of the simple reading-as-finding of truth to a participation in witness, the irreducibility not just of the body but of the connections between bodies, of the location of one's body in relation to other bodies. Here is a reading-as-making (and expressing) of the truth.

The technical touch focuses on what has been written, on the truth that can be deciphered from the marks and signs, the former touches which have left their traces on the body. It is all about the interpretation of what has been received. However, even the touch that reads not only receives but also gives. Ondaatje presents a touch that writes and creates as well as reads. When Anil is comforted by Ananda, she has the impression that his hand 'kneaded the skin of that imploded tension of weeping as if hers too was a face being sculpted'.⁶¹ When the narrator tells of the scene of the two Diyasena brothers, it is written that

this was a pietà between brothers. And all Gamini knew in his slow, scrambled state was that this would be the end or it could be the beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath. If he did not talk to him in this moment, admit himself, his brother would disappear from his life.⁶²

And Ananda's nephew's touch at the end is in the context of the two statues, the new Buddha and the old, reconstituted one which Ananda 'had helped knit together from

⁶¹ AG 187.

⁶² AG 288.

damaged stone, a statue that was no longer a god, that no longer had its graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had found'.⁶³ In the poignant realm of deepest feeling, of grief and love, of grief made possible by love and love demonstrated in grief, the moment of touch provides a moment of possibility. Not a possibility that undoes what has happened, that is capable of reversing tragedy, no, never that; but the moment of touch impresses a connection from one to another. The moment of touch is a moment of writing, of sharing fragments. Instead of only finding the truth, of discerning and interpreting truth, bodies here reach across unfathomable gulfs to make truth. They are faithful to the fragility of one another, to the vulnerability of existence and the insight that only in entering that fragility and vulnerability can possibility remain.

Though mutuality is important here, this is not a straightforward dialectic, not simply an exchange that is giving and receiving. It is not a question of two rival hermeneutics in total opposition to one another, each striving to supersede the other. Ondaatje presents neither a resolved clash of hermeneutical visions nor an everlasting conflict. Note that the two statues at the end of the book do not square off against each other, but rather they both gaze north together while standing at a remove from one another.⁶⁴ Sharing a common direction, both kinds of touch support one another in their interpretative work of outlining bodies and their stories, of pointing to the complexities of persons by showing them in contact with others. Overall, this is an hermeneutic that does not negate any reading, or raise one over another, but intertwines them like strands in a rope, not only strengthening one another, but making each other possible. And it is a neverending process, for the strands in this rope are not limited to the novel's characters and plot twists, but include the readers, who are forced to interpret the direction of the narrative arc, to become part of the story themselves, participating as first one strand, then another takes prominence, first one strand, then another submerges, not to disappear but to hold up what has emerged.⁶⁵

⁶³ AG 307.

⁶⁴ AG 306-7.

⁶⁵ In "A Flame against a Sleeping Lake of Petrol": Form and Sympathetic Witness in Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Patricia P. Chu also speaks of different hermeneutics, though she calls them responses, 'readerly' or 'writerly'. She also points to many of the same passages that I do. However, Chu makes more of the dialectical opposition between the two and less of their necessary support for each other. Chu has it that the two Buddhas will gaze at each other, that the writerly, the pure, sad, and human renews the characters at the end. This renewal may indeed be the case (and I would choose to imagine it so) but the novel reaches farther and deeper than that, and refuses any simplicity.

Tension, tendency, attending, intending, tenderness: the connection of all of these becomes no accident in *Anil's Ghost*. Though Sarath and Anil, among others, seek out the hardness of what remains solid and truthful, it is softness, the flesh that gives shape to bones, which stays with us. This softness holds both vulnerability and fondness, both that which is a sore spot and that which makes life worth living. Tenderness means carrying ghosts with you, carrying responsibility as a marker in your flesh, as part of your body. But the ghosts, together with the tales of touching, of reading and writing, incising and interpreting, give lively depth to the surfaces of life itself.

nterlude I



Bodies linger.

The feel of another person dances on your skin, where you touched him, where she touched you. You carry the moments of contact, sometimes of tenderness, sometimes of menace, sometimes of indifference. But the ghosts of the flesh tend to you. They impress themselves upon you, layer upon layer, moulding the contours of your world.


By the end of Ondaatje's novel, the ghosts of Anil Tissera have evaded the closure of the professional, technical touch. The people she has left behind, the vision of the truthful witness of bodies, the dead who speak her grief, memories of contact: all swirl around her and others, binding them, making them participate in what is personal. Bodies linger, teaching and learning the intimacy of the particularities of matter, of the intimate touch that matters, the stories remaining to be cherished. Even fragmentary remnants relate presence. What the theologies I explored neglected to see: to take bodies seriously is to discern precisely how they are at hand to one another.

Still, for bodies to relate requires more than just touch; they need position, the place of their proximity. This, too, the theologians I have looked at largely ignore; for them, locations are mainly starting points from which they set off in their quests for meaning, and so are soon left behind. But bodies in relationship are located contextually. Anil, Sarath, Gamini, Ananda and others relate the way they do because of their ties to Sri Lanka and its history; their bodies are tuned by the place, marked by all that happens around them. The specifics make the land important, not the generalities. But just as the place and its story inscribe them, they also leave their trace on the land. They intimate their embodiment to the earth, shaping the landscape in turn. Thus, beside the touch of personal concern, the body may also be discerned in the tale of its presence at a particular location. For this, we unfold a map, to see where bodies linger.

Chapter Six

Tracing Bodies:
Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass*
and
Intimate Geographies

And this, essentially is what maps give us, *reality*, a reality that exceeds our vision, our reach, the span of our days, a reality we achieve no other way. We are always mapping the invisible or the unattainable or the erasable, the future or the past, the whatever-is-not-here-present-to-our-senses-now and, through the gift that the map gives us, transmuting it into everything it is not...*into the real*.¹

 This is the power that maps have: with them, we mark out the emplacement and displacement of people and objects, connecting stories, bodies, landscapes and memory. We use maps to give shape to our experience; with cartography we turn the world into landscapes, the earth into an ordered, sensible image. The maps we make go beyond city plans and road atlases, becoming a graphic field for recording multiple complicated relationships. A map, then, is interactive: it has to be read, interpreted. To read the map is to change it, add to it, subtly shift its meanings; to read the map is also to interact with others who are reading. Participants write on each other, and are written upon. Through mapping, they construct the reality of their bodies in the world.

But bodies are not just objects on maps. If the map-readers who join together to write and draw maps of their worlds are drawing upon one another, bodies transform from being subjects of maps to becoming maps themselves. This is the image which appears in Jane Urquhart's novel *A Map of Glass*, which offers a writer's image of mapping the world that its characters and readers inhabit, tracing bodies in their relationship with one another.² When Urquhart examines the complex interactions between maps of landscape and maps of human relationships, she presents bodies as the maps that people read in their tentative quests to know one another and themselves. Even as the locations of people are worked out through the tracing of bodies' relationships in the world, the bodies themselves are also traced, or marked, by their proximity to one another. Bodies are touched into understanding, but that touch leaves its own marks—traces are inscribed, and every writing on the body, of the body, is a writing over. These body-maps are fragile—their fabric can fray or be whittled away to

¹ Denis Wood with John Fels, *The Power of Maps* 4.

² I am being quite precise when I talk about 'a writer's image of mapping'. As far as I know, Jane Urquhart is not a trained geographer, and neither am I. While I touch tangentially upon mapping as the discipline of geography might understand it, this is to throw light upon a literary use. This image of mapping is not necessarily the same as what geographers and cartographers actually do when they map.

whip-sharp edges—but bodies share this instability with other maps, whose meanings never remain as permanent as they first appear. Such instability allows meaning to grow as well as to fade. Just as mapping, being a hermeneutical exercise, multiplies meanings, so does the tracing and retracing of bodies.

A Map of Glass begins in winter, with a man suffering from Alzheimer's disease attempting to reach his ancestral island home, only to fail and die on the ice. The book ends with the image of a toy boat sent off down the river, past the same island, to the ocean, where the immense power of the waves destroys it. In between, the author explores the maps we make to chart the stasis and movement of bodies. The book comes to life in the space created by unresolved tensions: at one extreme is stasis, being fixed to the ground of your life in such a way that you are not free to roam, to explore; at the other is being out of place, drifting, lost without a home where you can anchor your own story. Both poles are places of death, yet the novel does not suggest any resolution for the tension. Instead, the stories told to the reader trace the spaces in between. These tracings have no end; they intricately tie the questions 'Where am I?' and 'Who am I?' to 'Where are you?' and 'Who are you?', and from these draw potential for life and hope. In *A Map of Glass*, the possibilities that live in our stories of loves and losses become the tracings that we leave behind. These traces of what and whom we hold dear may be almost imperceptible, but are also extremely volatile, simultaneously capable of creativity and destructiveness. Still, tracing the lines of intimacies, and then retracing them by narrating their stories, creates something new, augmenting the possibilities of the world.

This chapter uses the lens provided by Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass* to explore bodies and stories as tactile maps. Following a discussion of the general structure of the novel, I examine the symbolic implications of the three-dimensional maps which one of the protagonists, Sylvia, makes for a blind friend. I examine maps as symbolic fabrics, laden with signs which refer both to their own textuality and to the world outside their borders, and reflect upon what the lines traced between characters create. Then, I attend to the destructive potential of these things: the fragile connections which can shatter, leaving shards whose jagged edges make the traces of intimacies cuts and wounds. The chapter ends with a look at the possibilities for the readers of tactile maps of glass to pick up these fragments, attempting to piece them back together again.

The Structure of *A Map of Glass*

Urquhart's novel centres on Sylvia, the lover of the man who dies from Alzheimer's, and her communication with Jerome, the artist who found her lover's body. The book has three parts. The first part, 'The Revelations', introduces the two protagonists, narrating their individual stories and the way they come together when Sylvia leaves home to find Jerome without informing her husband. The story Sylvia tells of her love affair is also the story of her life, of her lover's family and its connection to the land, and of the love affair's connection with landscape. From the beginning we find that the dying man, Andrew, has a connection with geography; the last few words that stick in his memory are of topography.³ The reader later learns that Andrew was an historical geographer, occupied with such tasks as 'mapping the scant foundations of houses abandoned by vanished settlers'.⁴ Geographical and cartographic language intertwines with the story of Sylvia's lost love, unfolding among the flashbacks, giving form to the memories. Meanwhile, Jerome is struggling with his own past, with the trauma of discovering a dead body and his childhood memories.

The second part, 'The Bog Commissioners', is Andrew's story of the previous four generations of his family, the Woodmans, written in notebooks Sylvia lends to Jerome. This is also the tale of Timber Island, which became the family home after they immigrated from Britain. The island housed Andrew's great-great-grandfather Joseph's shipbuilding and timber-exporting empire, but the title of the section of the novel refers to Joseph's previous job in the British Isles, as a member of a Crown commission to investigate and report on the condition of bogs in Ireland.⁵ While doing that job, Joseph had conceived of a massive plan to drain the bogs, producing rich agricultural land to feed the people of Ireland. The British Government dismissed this outright, leading Joseph to leave in a huff to start a new life in the colonies. The big dream of altering landscapes, as well as concomitant regret over what was lost, haunts the story of the Woodmans, with devastating and surprising consequences.

³ MG 1-4.

⁴ MG 38.

⁵ MG 154.

The eponymous third part of the book returns to Jerome and Sylvia, who has been located by her husband. The story focuses on the last meeting of the bereft lover and the artist, the end of Sylvia's narration, after Jerome and his girlfriend, Mira, have read the Woodman notebooks. Sylvia relates what she knows of Andrew's final days, and Jerome is at last spurred to reveal the secrets of his own past.

The structure of the book functions as a map in two ways. First, the middle story-within-a-story constructs a narrative map for the characters and the plot. In the opening section, Sylvia orients her own narrative by reference to her dead lover's family history, pointing toward it with hints and quotes; in the last part of the novel, the action is anchored in the shape and imagery of the Woodman story.⁶ Second, all three parts are tied together through recurring symbolic imagery. For instance, one version of a sixteenth-century painting by Joachim Patinir, *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*, appears as a poster Mira has given Jerome; the same artist's work also leads to Andrew's great-grandfather Branwell's obsession with murals of landscapes throughout 'The Bog Commissioners'.⁷ Such imagery links the narrative chronology of Sylvia and Jerome to the longer history of the Woodmans, and also constructs a map for the reader, with traces of meaning to follow like cartographic symbols, like the blue line representing a river or a small cross representing a church.

⁶ Sylvia's orientation toward the journals becomes most explicit near the end of 'The Revelations', after she has given them to Jerome to read. She runs over quotes from the story in her mind, and recalls her habitual nocturnal perusal of the notebooks: 'And then, the following day, when she was alone, Sylvia would say certain sentences aloud, knowing that by doing so she could evoke a scene quite different than the one in which she stood or walked, could make her own kitchen disappear, for instance, and cause the shadow of a barn door on sandy ground, the glint of lake, leaves twisting in a breeze appear in its place' (MG 139-40). In the third part, reading the journals appears as a focused activity for Jerome and Mira (299-304, 319-24), and speculative continuation of the journals' story which Sylvia writes becomes her final words to Jerome, as well as the novel's climax (364-9).

⁷ See MG 25, for the first description of the poster, and 163-5 for Branwell's description of the painting he saw in the Louvre. In the third part, Sylvia's husband looks at the poster and asks Jerome if that was one of his pieces (355), and Sylvia refers to the 'turquoise landscape that [Branwell] had carried with him for most of his life' during her continuation of the family story (366). While the painting represents the artistic goal of Branwell, it also is emblematic of Jerome's story, not only because of the name of the saint, but because of his struggles with interior and exterior wildernesses as well. Like St. Jerome and his lion, Jerome the artist makes friends with a feral cat, who follows him home (24-8). In the third part, after hearing stories of Hindu gods, Jerome reflects that he himself is 'far from godlike' but 'resembled more a tattered, starved saint: thin, almost defeated, trudging back from the wilderness' (304).

Tactile Maps

In *A Map of Glass*, Sylvia's story is complicated by the fact that she may or may not have an autism-spectrum disorder.⁸ She finds human interaction difficult, but has an eye for the details of objects and locations. This allows her to befriend Julia, a blind woman for whom she makes tactile maps of the county in which they live.

"She's blind," Sylvia explained [to Jerome], "but touching a map is one of the ways she is able to see. I didn't think I could do it at first, didn't think I could translate landscape into texture on a board. But then I know the County so well; I suppose that made it easier."⁹

Sylvia presents what she knows and loves of her home as maps made out of a variety of materials—everything from fabric to wood—which symbolise varieties of terrain. The symbolism must be very exact, not just portraying 'water' but water that can be rough, not just a beach but one 'filled with small, smooth stones'.¹⁰ This is because Julia 'not only wanted to know how to get to a place...she wanted to be able to see what was in the vicinity'.¹¹ Using her imagination, Julia could experience the world through touch.

When Sylvia tells her friend that 'she knew a man whose profession allowed him to explore not only geological phenomena but also the traces of human activity that were left behind on the textured surface of the earth,' Julia comments that 'the whole world is a kind of Braille'.¹² Note that Julia's association of exploration with a reading and writing system specifically involves tangible human traces: we human beings not only read the earth's story from the stones, but also write our own story in the dust. Of Andrew, Sylvia says that 'He claimed that everywhere he went he found evidence of the behaviour of his forebears: rail fences, limestone foundations, lilac bushes blooming on otherwise abandoned farmsteads, an arcade of trees leading to a house that is no longer

⁸ This is mainly referred to as Sylvia's 'condition', and once as her 'disability' (88).

⁹ MG 123-4.

¹⁰ MG 68 and 146.

¹¹ MG 69.

¹² MG 68.

there.’¹³ These are ‘remnants’ and the ‘sad refuse’ of lives lived, but still they remain; they have been written upon the world and so become material memory.¹⁴

The image of tactile maps, of reading and writing by touch on the landscape, extends far beyond those maps produced on boards or paper; the characters of the novel, their bodies and relationships, become tactile maps for one. This is true of Jerome—his relationship with Mira, his memories of his parents—but Sylvia’s life provides the most explicit examples. Sylvia talks about how her affair with Andrew ‘opened the door of the world for her’, let her experience what she had never known before.¹⁵ Replete with her memories of intimacies, Sylvia implies that touch and caress draw the boundaries that remap and thus remake her existence. The narrator says that Sylvia ‘had never told Andrew how touch, until him, had been a catastrophe for her, how having leapt over the hurdle of touch, he would then become a part of her’.¹⁶ Bodies connect to landscape in passage after passage: for example, Sylvia speaks of ‘the sense that while we held each other we were, in turn, being held by the rocks and trees we could see from the windows and the creeks and springs we could sometimes hear running through the valley’.¹⁷ The

¹³ MG 96-7.

¹⁴ MG 97. Another aspect of this is Urquhart’s portraying human *interpretations* of landscape as marking the earth and shaping our narratives. One of the prime examples of this is Timber Island. The island’s character derives from its location at the end of Lake Ontario and the beginning of the St. Lawrence River; ‘The Bog Commissioners’ opens by describing how the workers inhabiting the island divided between those who believed the island was in the lake and those who believed it was part of the river, and how this division was influenced by language and nationality (153-4). Urquhart depicts Timber Island as a place of change, and particularly of decay and loss. Jerome is on the island to record the end of winter and the revelations that come when the snow melts (hence the name of the first part), observing signs of long-gone human life, such as an old grave marker, before he finds Andrew’s body (11-31). The Woodman notebooks relate the end of the island’s industry, but even in its heyday the island’s products seem temporary, the wooden ships susceptible to treacherous coasts and dangerous storms—one of Branwell’s sister Annabelle’s favourite pastimes was painting images of smashing, sinking schooners (158)—and the rafts sent downriver become only ‘the most temporary of constructed worlds...engaged in the artificial evolutionary process that was thrust upon them’ as they briefly became floating villages before being broken up at the ports where they were loaded into ships destined for Europe (198-9). An island’s containedness makes it a good laboratory for experiments in imagination (cf. Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*), but even more so Timber Island is always a body in flux, much like the human bodies Urquhart portrays. This depiction of the island recalls Judith Butler’s observation at the beginning of *Bodies that Matter*: ‘Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies “are”’ (ix). The isolation of the island is an illusion; it is constantly being acted upon by waves and ice, and it is connected to the world around it. Its identity is given to it through the interpretations of various people who light upon it—and, in turn, it effects change in the lives of those bodies which become contingent to its liminal location.

¹⁵ MG 117.

¹⁶ MG 38.

¹⁷ MG 339.

touching of flesh depicts a web of various levels of intimacy, but also extends beyond this to write relationships upon one's memory. The exception is Sylvia's relationship with her husband, Malcolm, who—the narrator often and expressly tells the reader—never touches his wife's body, even when helping her with the clasp of a necklace.¹⁸ One suspects that Malcolm, a doctor, thinks of Sylvia more as patient than wife; he has rejected her tactile map and can never be truly alive with her.¹⁹

For Sylvia, living originates with memory; her tactile map is composed of remembered details from her clandestine meetings with Andrew. Rather than reading this map to learn of landscape, she scours the landscape for its record of her love. She holds onto a geography textbook not for what it might tell her about the earth but because of 'the incised lines that would indicate that Andrew had marked a particular passage with his thumbnail', so that she could feel 'this practically invisible, frail trace of him on the printed text'.²⁰ When he finally disappears, missing their last rendezvous, she takes his journals and notebooks away with her because 'the ink on the page' was 'the last trace of his moving hand'.²¹ Such texts help Sylvia remember Andrew's hands moving over another surface, over her skin, writing on her heart.

Put together, such examples show the literary relationships of the novel tracing out a space within which people move and touch. One's body becomes familiar with another body not statically, but in the way they move towards and away from each other. Our tactile maps are formed by habit and routine, too, by recurrence in the movements by which we change our proximities, something that social geographer Kevin Hetherington notes, writing that 'Whereas we enter our houses through the front door, we enter our homes through our slippers'.²² Our experiences of a space are constructed from the feelings that accumulate with our presence in that space. We locate ourselves by touch. Yes, that touch is fragmentary—as Hetherington notes, it is 'local, specific, incomplete, multiple, personal, erroneous perhaps'—but deep connection

¹⁸ MG 314.

¹⁹ This ignoring of the body-as-map does not extend as far as the medical profession itself. Indeed, in one instance, Sylvia thinks of the textbooks in her husband's study, and she goes 'to sleep comforted by the thought that someone, anyone, had taken the trouble to attend to a tragic alteration of the body, as if they had wanted to draw a map of its regions, then explore its territories' (317).

²⁰ MG 92.

²¹ MG 347.

²² Kevin Hetherington, 'Spacial textures: place, touch and praesentia' 1939.

comes from piecing together an interpretation of the world from the fragments with which we are presented.²³ Although his article uses as examples the space created by the visually impaired navigating museum exhibits through touch, and the devotional space generated by human contact with religious relics, this creation of spatial understanding does not occur only with things.²⁴ As we see with *A Map of Glass*, we also draw maps of human connection from the collection of our experiences with one another, the contact of bodies which each have their own perspectives.

Bodies and Fracture

In the book, Sylvia strives to learn as much as she can about her lover's last journey, examining maps to imagine what happened to his body, 'to add some information to the long, sad message of Andrew's silence'.²⁵ She seeks to follow Andrew himself, who once told her that 'there was always a mark left on a landscape by anyone who entered it'.²⁶ However, Sylvia discovers that this is not as easy as it might seem; the man who spent his life recording a vanishing past to reconstruct its landscape

²³ Hetherington 1942.

²⁴ The connection to saints' relics in Hetherington 1940-1, is especially interesting in light of the motif of St. Jerome/Jerome the artist in MG (see n. 7 above). Hetherington points to scholarship analysing how relics in their specifically situated shrines make present something (or someone) absent: the touching of objects which carry particular values and meanings invokes those values and meaning not just because of the objects, but because of the way they are arranged in a specific space. We can connect this to Urquhart's novel in that, for Jerome and St. Jerome as painted, the relic's praesentia are carried in the narrative; for Sylvia, the journals, notebooks and other texts which she has salvaged from her former meeting place with Andrew become relics which keep alive her memory of love. Hetherington also makes a passing reference to another theological connection by pointing to the Eucharist as doing something similar, though he takes this no further. I would develop this to argue that sacraments, too, make a tactile map: contact with physical elements set in a context of narrative and theological meaning shapes people, providing a way to see the world. At a very basic level, the physical elements of sacraments mediate between persons. One person applies the sign of water to another; one person shares a portion of bread, a cup of wine, with another: such actions map physical memory through the meeting of bodies.

In any case, Hetherington limits his argument to things and places, showing the way these connect to familiarity and the sense of being at home; I would expand this to other people in the touch of flesh to flesh, an intimacy also capable of giving the sense of being at home. This is complicated by the issue of intentionality or accident. During one scene in Urquhart's novel, when Sylvia is visiting Julia, Sylvia proclaims that she can infer no difference 'between touch and collision', and Julia replies that 'There is being touched, and then there is touching, and attached to both of these things there is intention.' In response, Sylvia makes explicit the great hermeneutical question: 'But how do you know for sure what is intended?' (MG 70). In part, the entirety of the novel is an exploration of that.

²⁵ MG 348.

²⁶ MG 326.

did not leave much of a trace of his own—certainly no trace of their affair, unknown to anyone but them.²⁷ ‘Landscapes are unreliable’, Sylvia muses; they ‘are subject to change’.²⁸ Sylvia thus realises one dark undercurrent of the exercise of mapmaking: while you attempt to represent the landscape, it continues shifting, however minutely, so that you are always only documenting a past.²⁹ Thus, a map is the result of a violent attempt to arrest the earth, but it remains a phantom. At one point, Sylvia places maps alongside ‘objects’ and ‘vanished children’ in ‘the family of the dead’.³⁰ And though she had once found solace only in this past’s family, after experiencing love and loss Sylvia admits

I have not been close to many people, Jerome, but I know that once they leave us they become insubstantial, and no matter how we try we cannot hold them, we cannot reconstruct. The dead don’t answer when we call them. The dead are not our friends.³¹

The tactile maps—the bodies that we experience—are only fragments, never a possession of all the world.³²

The fragmentary nature of maps in the book is also reflected by the title’s reference to Robert Smithson’s artwork, *The Map of Glass* (a quote from the artist also serves as the book’s epigraph).³³ In 1969, Smithson created this piece by heaping broken glass in a field, then waiting for bright sunlight before

²⁷ MG 326, 328, 346.

²⁸ MG 146.

²⁹ See Wood; Geoff King, *Mapping Reality*; and Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *The Power of Projections*, particularly the beginning but throughout, for various discussions of what maps do, and their political, social and historical power in representing and making territory.

³⁰ MG 76.

³¹ MG 368.

³² Another example of this comes after Branwell’s beloved wife dies, when he takes to praying her rosary, being ‘moved by the knowledge that his wife’s fingers had travelled over the surface of the beads that his own fingers were touching now’, only to find that ‘in the end, like all his other attempts to reach her now, this would become unsatisfying’ so that eventually even the sight of the rosary became too painful for him to bear (279).

³³ The quotation, from Smithson’s *Collected Writings*, is ‘By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a “logical two dimensional picture.” A “logical picture” differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for’. This draws attention to the devious nature of maps, and alerts the reader to the potential need for a high degree of suspicion.

photographing.³⁴ Intriguingly, Smithson refers to his *Map of Glass* as a map of Atlantis; describing the moment the light came out, he writes that

A luciferous incest of light particles flashes into a brittle mass. A stagnant blaze sinks into the glassy map of a non-existent island. The sheets of glass leaning against each other allow the sunny flickers to slide down into hidden fractures of splintered shadow. The map is a series of ‘upheavals’ and ‘collapses’—a strata of unstable fragments is arrested by the friction of stability.³⁵

Smithson highlights the fragility of the ‘map’ and how the sunlight brings out the appearance of effervescent transience. That Urquhart chose to allude to the work and the artist through her book’s title, epigraph, and—as shall be seen—discussions in the body of the text could indicate several connotations: a desire to emphasise the elusive nature of the map; that Timber Island is like Atlantis, a place that inspires fantasies and utopias, whose history is associated with lost splendour, and whose story is reconstructed imaginatively; or that the world of the narrative is a delicate composition. The allusion carries a diffusion of meanings, just like Smithson’s island of glass pieces.

In the text of the novel, the sight of great slabs of ice during the spring breakup reminds the artist Jerome of Smithson’s work. He recalls being attracted by ‘the brilliance and the feeling of danger in the piece: the shattering of experience and the sense of being cut, injured’.³⁶ He has the impression that ice piled on the shore is something of an artistic gift—until he finds Andrew Woodman encased in it. Much later, while talking to Sylvia, Jerome makes the connection again, pondering the possible reference of Smithson’s title, saying: ‘I’ve never known if he meant a map of the properties of glass, or if he was referring to a glass map, which would then be, of course, breakable’.³⁷ Perhaps, for Urquhart, the reference is to both: the properties might refer to how glass allows one to see through it but also reflects light, so that the novel shows how the maps we make provide a lens for seeing the world and a mirror for seeing ourselves; yet a map made of breakable glass implies the maps that we construct

³⁴ For pictures of the artwork, see Elyse Goldberg, “Robert Smithson: Photoworks: Hypothetical Continent—Map of Rroken [sic] Glass: Atlantis”. For a description and another picture, see Robert Smithson, ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan’, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* 133 n1 and 132 (second figure).

³⁵ Smithson, ‘Mirror-Travel’, 133 n1.

³⁶ MG 18.

³⁷ MG 337.

(tactile and otherwise) are unstable and fragile. They are as insubstantial as the dead and as ungraspable as memory.³⁸

Opposed to images of tactile maps as tools of discovery and world-construction are images of the pain involved when one person's imprint is inscribed on another's. Fingers and skin, Urquhart reminds us, do not simply receive information passively; they also cut. Touch 'causes fracture'.³⁹ Sylvia thinks of 'the risks two people took simply by being alone together in the same room. Murder, love, collision, caress, were they not all part of the same family?'⁴⁰ She herself had moved away from familiar things toward 'tension and deceit and the growing knowledge of inevitable bereavement' and she did not know why.⁴¹ Jerome dreams of Smithson's *Map of Glass* reflecting broken, shattered fragments of his father in its shards.⁴² The 'approach of someone significant in your life, a friend, a lover, an enemy' becomes like 'lightning.'⁴³ Sylvia has 'scraped [her] memory like a glacier through [her] mind' trying to remember every detail, trying to remember the 'when' of every storytelling time with her dead lover.⁴⁴ She recalls that long before she lost him, she was walking through 'the territory of aftermath', leading finally to an embrace already bereaved.⁴⁵ 'That,' she says,

³⁸ If Urquhart read the note in Smithson's *Collected Writings* about *The Map of Glass*, she might also have read the end of the article on the same page, about art installations created at various sites in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, of which art Smithson states all that is left is 'memory-traces' and that 'Remembrances are but numbers on a map, vacant memories constellating the intangible terrains in deleted vicinities. It is the dimension of absence that remains to be found.... Yucatan is elsewhere' (Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 132-3). Similar comments could, it seems, be made of the novel's characters and their stories, which cannot bring back loved ones who are gone, or restore dear places that have been altered forever. If one considers the depiction of art within the novel, Smithson's words are comparable to the sentiment of the closing images of the second part, which describe the gradual destruction of Branwell's greatest mural: 'Finally, the fractured wall paintings would be covered by no fewer than ten layers of paper flowers and paste [from wallpaper] and the landscape would be forgotten altogether. And, in the end, a tenant suffering from the effects of a particularly cold winter would punch a stovepipe hole into the wall above the fireplace in the upper west room, little knowing, as he did so, that he had completely destroyed Branwell Woodman's carefully rendered moon' (MG 293).

³⁹ MG 87.

⁴⁰ MG 336.

⁴¹ MG 332.

⁴² MG 145.

⁴³ MG 366.

⁴⁴ MG 368.

⁴⁵ MG 341.

was when I knew that emotionally he had fully entered me, and that from then on his grief would be my grief, his story my story, his enormous waves of feeling, my feeling. I had felt almost nothing until him, and now I would continue to carry all of the rage and terror and anguish that he would leave behind, that he would forget.⁴⁶

Her lover has been mapped upon her, not just in joy and the memories of pleasure but in the acuteness of loss and absence. She cannot shake grief's piercing of her body and her heart.⁴⁷

Maps of Glass, Maps of Flesh

For all of this, *A Map of Glass* also reminds us that the shards of aftermath may reflect tenderness along with brokenness. Although memories seem to reach for the ungraspable, and the novel tells stories of losses that seem total, the stories themselves remain: artistic compositions and loving renderings, bittersweet though they might be, maintain the traces of life in all its complexities. For example, in the second part, after the death of Joseph Woodman, Annabelle decides to organise his office; while doing this, she discovers maps he made while working for the bog commission in Ireland. All of her life, Annabelle's father had ranted over his time in Ireland, convinced the country and its people symbolised all that was chaotic, backward and troublesome, yet the maps that she found were beautiful, 'drafted with such exquisite care they could only have been made with love'.⁴⁸ Annabelle was stunned by the riddle, wondering,

How was it possible that her father could render the very landscape that had been the source of his humiliation with such meticulous affection? There was something wistful and tender about the maps, and Annabelle, strolling once again among them, began to understand that her father must have been bruised by experience or filled with longing at one time or another. None of this made any sense at all in the face of the tyrant he

⁴⁶ MG 343-4.

⁴⁷ This jagged-edged, fragmentary nature of maps may again be compared to sacraments. They, too, are maps of glass, holding their own peril. Some of this lies in the stories that they remember. Along with the idea of a washing-away of sins, baptism carries the concept of being baptised into the death of Jesus. The telling of the story behind the Eucharist often begins with 'On the night that he was betrayed' (See 1 Cor. 11:23). Embedded in the story is failure, not only the treachery of Judas but also the failure of all the disciples to keep watch, to stay with Jesus, to accompany him. The main action of the Eucharist, indeed, is a breaking of bread called the Fraction: a tearing of one loaf into pieces so that it may be shared with many. Sacramental maps are maps of fragments, fragile webs of islands of memory standing close to death, with most of the territory unexplored.

⁴⁸ MG 228.

had been in his prime, or even the confused old man he had turned into later, and yet there was no denying that the younger man who had made these maps was one with vision and heart.⁴⁹

The maps of Ireland—the works of art—point Annabelle to aspects of her father she never knew, an artistic side irretrievably lost, never once met. However, the maps remain, a sign of what had been lost, a tender body that could be reconstructed in Annabelle's imagination. She might think of the unknown characteristics of her father as 'a gift she had never been given', but the maps actually present her with that gift, producing a new vision of the past.⁵⁰

Near the end of the novel, Sylvia laments the terrible way that her love was lost, the horror of Alzheimer's making the man she loved forget her and the details of their story. She describes what it is like when 'His body knows what to do, but his mind has forgotten, his heart has been stilled'.⁵¹ Without memory, the body seems to have no story. But though the story-less body leads to the sharp ache of her pain, the body is also the site where meaning remains. Sylvia ponders what could possibly matter about her traceless love, and comes up with this: 'What matters is that we ever met at all, the miracle of the life I never could have lived without the idea of him, and the arm of that idea resting on my shoulder'.⁵² While the writing that her lover traced on the world seems all but erased, readers of the novel see that the traces of his life remain because they have been mapped in Sylvia; she incorporates all the slight traces of their time together into the roots and branches of her life, and this allows her to flourish in ways that had been impossible for her before. Such maps of glass, though they are fragile and full of potential sorrow, provide more than just an orientation for living in the world. Their tension gives them life.⁵³

Even as Sylvia carries the story of her lover with her, even as Annabelle picks up a trace of her father's complexity in the maps he had made so long before, so does

⁴⁹ MG 228-9.

⁵⁰ MG 229.

⁵¹ MG 368.

⁵² MG 369.

⁵³ In this, Urquhart even plants a note of suspicion against her emblem-creating artist, Robert Smithson. Even though Smithson suggests that maps do not always resemble what they represent, and that absence is all there really is in art's transitory nature (see n34 and n38 above), the way the story of the art—and the love—remains suggest that absence is not all there is in the relations of bodies.

the reader take up the map. Gingerly perhaps, cautious of the sharp edges, the reader picks up the fragments of stories, memories, places, seeking to join in tracing the almost imperceptible marks made by contact between bodies. And, all the while, those marks are being traced upon the reader, until the story of Sylvia and her love, of Andrew and his family, of Sylvia's meetings with Jerome, and of the other stories they all touch become mapped on the reader, too. But remember, landscapes are unreliable. They change. They fade. Still, this is what allows them to hold the traces of our touch, to be able to tell stories: to cry out to be mapped.

A map is a symbolic fabric, a web of glyphs which, in the arrangement of their proximity to one another, represent values and meanings for its readers in their attempts to orient themselves to one another and the world. A map is an essay at turning the wilderness into landscape. However, the wilderness is in the map itself, in the interpretation of the one who engages in it, in the exercise of weaving the symbolic fabric from what is known amid passion and peril. In *A Map of Glass*, though, we find that maps are not just charted on paper, that people in their intimate lives together engage in charting by touch, a tracing out of bodies that makes maps of flesh. These maps draw the landscape of memory, not just to tell us where we are, but to lead us, trembling and vulnerable, into the proximity of others—to trace the shape of our life in the world.

nterlude II



Bodies insist.

They refuse to be forgotten, to slip from mind and memory. Bodies cry out to be heard; even when they are quiet, when they huddle in a corner, when time or other people have silenced them, their presence witnesses to the complex of their existence, for no one is without a story, unknown though it may be.

Bodies make demands which cannot totally be ignored. If people turn away, the earth will notice; bodies imprint their insistence simply with their passage from one place to another, or their abiding in one location on the surface of the earth, always making subtle waves even in a sea of stone. Theologians—at least, those who are children of Abraham and know the stories of Eden and after—should know this. When Cain killed Abel and shrugged to God, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’, the Lord replied that Abel’s blood cried to him from the ground.

A great theological question: ‘Am I the body’s keeper?’

Sylvia and Jerome discover an answer in the enduring insistence of bodies and the impression which relationships make on the landscape. Sylvia is not supposed to be able to love—not *that* way—but bodies teach her otherwise. Jerome tries to isolate himself from the lineage of his body, but it cries out from the ground of a stranger’s story. Yet, if bodies wait to be read, and linger on your skin, they also demand readers to interpret them. Bodies insist on a response to the fragments of lives, the snatches of songs, the beckoning lined-out by limbs, syllables that beat in the blood. They demand attention be paid to the materiality of grief. One body asks another to pronounce their name correctly. In the process, in the shaping of their stories, they invite people to participate in the construction of the world; to reflect on this, we listen for fugitive pieces, and join in the work of weaving them together.

Chapter Seven

Learning What to Do with the Body:
Form and Meaning
in
Fugitive Pieces

Any discovery of form is a moment of memory,
 existing as the historical moment – alone,
 and existing in history – linear,
 in music, in the sentence.
 Each poem, each piece remembers us perfectly,
 the way the earth remembers our bodies,
 the way man and woman in their joining
 remember each other before they were separate.¹

To praise memory is to praise the body’ writes Anne Michaels, in a long poem entitled ‘Words for the Body’.² Imagery and poetic devices throughout her writing link memory, story, history, narrative to the physical, to the body, and, in turn, to the body’s experience of the earth: Michaels explores narrated moments of body and memory as illuminated in geology and weather. Her novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, like her collections of poetry, observes these narrated moments with a precision of metaphor that presents a world of lyrically beautiful language. However, this becomes problematic as readers realise what sort of story the novel is trying to tell. *Fugitive Pieces* is a book about the effects of the Holocaust on those who escaped, and on their children. The novel describes memories which are not beautiful, memories of pain and loss, in which, the victims are people whose very humanity has been written off by their enemies; Michaels calls this ‘the power of language to destroy, to omit, to obliterate’.³ The topic and the events of the plot jar against the exquisite gracefulness of *Fugitive Pieces*’ poetic prose.

And yet, Michaels has one of the two protagonists, Jakob Beer, a poet and translator, write of poetry as being ‘the power of language to restore’.⁴ Where Jakob is left with fragments of his own story, with the pain of others embedded in his flesh—as he survived the Holocaust, but his family did not—poetry becomes the art of piecing together fragments, of allowing a new embodiment of life. Through poetry, Jakob translates the losses of his shattered life into possibility, a newness which is enacted

¹ Anne Michaels, ‘Words for the Body’, WOMP 48.

² WOMP, 48.

³ FP 79.

⁴ FP 79.

when he finally finds true love. The fullness of his relationship with Michaela, his second wife, embodies the possibility of a better future. Still, this does not negate the discomfort and instability generated by the novel. How can anyone turn the Holocaust into a story with a happy ending, into a love story, without being, at best, reductionist? Michaels herself acknowledges the problem by making sure there are no easy answers: Jakob's story, comprising the first two thirds of the book, has no conventional happy ending at all; the second part, which tells the story of Ben, an admirer of Jakob's poetry, also ends uncertainly.

But Michaels is still pointing to poetry as a language of restoration—only it is not just in the plot of the story that her novel tells. At one point, Ben is told, 'when we say we're looking for a spiritual advisor, we're really looking for someone to tell us what to do with our bodies'.⁵ Reading *Fugitive Pieces* is a tutorial in learning what to do with the body. The form of the book, as a collection of fragments around gaps and silences, with complex allusions and metaphors in densely poetic prose, weaves new possibilities for the reader in imaginative engagement with the text. Michaels plays with formal literary markers in order to bend and blur genres. *Fugitive Pieces*, essentially, is a book-length prose poem. Just as imagery ties remembrance to the body and physical existence, intimating that the meaning of what we experience exhibits itself materially, so the meaning of Michaels' novel is bound intricately to its form. In turn, by enacting the possibility for restoration in the form of her writing, Michaels suggests that the importance of shape for a body lies in how shape is imagined and re-imagined, and in how this can reconstruct the world.

In this chapter, I examine in turn the novel's claim that language has power both to destroy and reconstruct. To sharpen my investigation in each case, I turn to the work of Elaine Scarry, observing that Anne Michaels's novel, in representing bodily destruction and reconstruction, closely echoes the structure and themes of Scarry's analysis of *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. This leads to an overview of the poetic prose which Michaels employs, arguing that the author strives to enact the creative power of language with her choice of diction; I also address criticism of the notion of restorative language. Finally, I discuss the way Michaels uses the form of *Fugitive Pieces* in an attempt to offer to the reader the possibility of imagining

⁵ FP 210.

restoration. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what the importance of form in literature implies for notions of the body and meaning.

Fugitive Pieces and The Body in Pain

The truth is why words fail.
 We can only reveal by outline,
 by circling absence.
 But that's why language
 can remember truth when it's not spoken.
 Words in us that deafen,
 that wait, even when their spell seems
 wasted;
 even while silence
 accumulates to fate.⁶

In the fictive world of *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels uses her poetic representation of the world—intertwining flesh, earth, and memory—to chart the consequences of language's power on the body, both destructive and creative. A synopsis of the novel shows the extensive range of this theme. As mentioned, the novel has two parts. The first part, the bulk of the book, is the story of Jakob, and his response to the way the Holocaust has shaped his life, through the murder of his parents and friends, and particularly the disappearance of his sister, Bella. The tale begins with his escape from the deadly fate of the rest of his family, and his rescue by Athos, a Greek geologist working at an archaeological dig in Poland. Athos takes Jakob to a Greek island to wait out the war. After the war, Athos accepts an invitation to teach at the University of Toronto, taking Jakob with him. The story of Jakob's attempts to come to terms with history follows him through one marriage (short-lived, to Alex) and into a second (of lasting love, with Michaela), through the course of his blossoming as a poet, and through the return to his foster-father's ancestral home in Greece. The second part of *Fugitive Pieces*, the story of Ben, takes the examination of history's repercussions to the next generation; Ben is the son of Holocaust survivors, an academic fascinated by the connection of weather, biography, history and literature. His life is burdened by the weight of the sufferings of his parents, stretching his relationship with his wife to the

⁶ 'What the Light Teaches', WOMP, 116 [§8].

breaking point. Having come into contact with Jakob through a mutual friend, Ben becomes fascinated with the poet's apparent serenity. After the older man dies, Ben travels to his empty home in Greece to seek the poet's hidden memoirs, and to find peace for himself.

In their different ways, the protagonists of *Fugitive Pieces* are bereaved survivors; their loved ones have suffered because language and systems of belief have honed the edges of weapons. The tales of Jakob and Ben circumnavigate the terrible aftermath of the void created by the attempted annihilation of a people right in the middle of modern Europe; their bodies carry grief wherever they go. While they seek solace, trying to find some kind of truth in the texts embedded in the earth and written records of what happened, a chain reaction of language binds them to a violent erosion of the world. However, the book posits the possibility that beauty founded in love can make things new—that restorative language has the resources to oppose obliteration and liberate the afflicted from the bonds which diminish their humanity.

By doing this, Michaels's novel traces a line very similar to what Elaine Scarry sketches in *The Body in Pain*. Scarry's work investigates first the dismantling of human worlds through the actions of those who use violence against others and then the construction of the world through the action of creative imagination. Her examination of violence focuses on torture and on war. She uncovers the way inflicting pain and injury upon others reduces their ability to function, disempowering their humanity by taking apart their bodies and, thence, their ability to sense and understand their world. Indeed, their world becomes an agent of oppression, twisted into collusion with the torturers or attackers.⁷ Conversely, in the second half of the book, Scarry reflects upon what she calls 'the nature of artifice': the process by which imagination works to make, not just things and isolated texts, but the texture of the inhabited world.⁸ She argues that, whereas violence constricts life's possibilities, acts of creative imagining—whether they craft systems of belief or intentional, physical objects—work to expand the world by extending the body, altering the environment 'without hurting'.⁹ The opposite of destruction is the generation of possibility.

⁷ BP 48-51.

⁸ BP 181.

⁹ BP 176.

One might say that Michaels narrates what Scarry theorises. Thus, to outline more clearly the direction of *Fugitive Pieces*, I examine the novel in terms of the structure of *The Body in Pain*.

‘The power of language to destroy’

Scarry writes of torture as ‘a language, an objectification, an acting out’, and declares that ‘Nowhere is the sadistic potential of a language built on agency so visible as in torture’.¹⁰ Such language creates a hierarchy of action, lifting up those with the authority to wield words above those who lack that authority. It creates the opportunity for the powerful to redefine the weak and further solidify their own dominant position. This observation of language’s destructive power is strongly exemplified in *Fugitive Pieces*, when Michaels has Jakob reflect that

Nazi policy was beyond racism, it was anti-matter, for Jews were not considered human. An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as “figuren,” “stücke”—“dolls,” “wood,” “merchandise,” “rags.” Humans were not being gassed, only “figuren,” so ethics weren’t being violated. No one could be faulted for burning debris, for burning rags and clutter in the dirty basement of society. In fact, they’re a fire hazard! What choice but to burn them before they harm you.¹¹

This is language that acts with the goal of negation, unravelling any relationships that might exist, even between former neighbours. Such words bluntly turn human bodies into things, as if they are already corpses.

The systemic nature of this brutality appears in *Fugitive Pieces* not only in descriptions of atrocities committed by Nazis and others against Jews, but also in the book’s depiction of the regime’s consumption of history. Athos becomes obsessed with writing a book about the *SS-Ahnenerbe*, a Nazi historians and archaeologists who sought to demonstrate the superiority of ancient Aryan civilisation. If they could not fit evidence to their conception of history, they destroyed it; in *Fugitive Pieces*, Biskupin, the site where Athos is working—and where he finds Jakob—is destroyed by the Nazis because it ‘was proof of an advanced culture that wasn’t German’.¹² Language, in

¹⁰ BP 27.

¹¹ FP 165.

¹² FP 104.

orders given, impels the violent theft of history.¹³ Merely having hegemony over others is not enough—destruction has to be total, extending to making the victims believe they are worthless, too.¹⁴ Michaels shows that a totalitarian conquest of the body includes a conquest of memory, of stories and language.¹⁵

Fugitive Pieces deals with the consequences of dehumanising language, leaving questions of motivation largely unanswered.¹⁶ Michaels offers litanies of atrocities. She tells of the child Jakob hearing his parents' murders, then seeing their bodies; of the inhabitants of ancient Jewish communities drowned in the Mediterranean; of the lives of Jews 'purchased for a quart of brandy, perhaps four pounds of sugar, cigarettes'.¹⁷ She outlines Jews being hanged from their thumbs, the desecration of cemeteries, the concentration camp inmates who were forced to carry boulders unendingly from one spot to another and back again, mothers who were handed the severed heads of their daughters, the burning of books, the bayoneting of babies, the gas chambers.¹⁸ The piling of indignities and sufferings along with and against the rich cadence of Michaels's writing jolts the reader with a souring of language. She moves us to the edge of the ruined lives which haunt the survivors, invites us to stare into the absence created by the loss of so many and so much. But only for a moment, only as they are buried. Exposing the language of torturing annihilation generates in turn a language of burial,

¹³ This accords with BP's discussion of how the dismantling of other people proceeds purposefully as those with power bestow upon themselves what they have stripped from their victims. Scarry refers to this as 'the conversion of the enlarged map of human suffering into an emblem of the regime's strength' (56).

¹⁴ As seen when the young Jakob, only knowing one phrase in more than one language, cries out, over and over: 'dirty Jew' (FP 13).

¹⁵ In the 2007 film adaptation of the novel, for which Michaels served as a consultant, one of the few additional scenes involving new dialogue consisted of the re-imagined father of Ben noting that Athos's work on his book was important because 'Already people say the things I lived through never happened'. The reference to the phenomenon of "Holocaust deniers" points to just how insidious the attempt to conquer memory and history can be, affecting people long after the original events.

¹⁶ The book does allude to the issue, but only fleetingly is it made explicit. At one point, when Jakob is reflecting upon the book that Athos had been writing, he states:

Our eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness. Athos could speak of it, he needed to speak of it, but I couldn't. He asked endless questions to order his thoughts, leaving "why" to the last. But in my thinking, I started with the last question, the "why" he hoped would be answered by all the others. Therefore I began with failure and had nowhere to go (FP 118).

¹⁷ FP 7, 42-3, 45.

¹⁸ FP 46, 50, 53, 93, 138, 168.

of drowning, of hiding, of celebrating what lies under the ground and in the smallest, darkest corners. The body disappears from sight. Sometimes people are snatched from view by others, sometimes people shrink away to escape notice, but in all cases images of a subterranean world fill the pages of *Fugitive Pieces*, from caves to graves, ancient and modern.¹⁹ The destructive power of language keeps people from being present to one another.²⁰

As unveiled by Michaels, this destructive linguistic power and its effects on Jews and others do not end with the Nazis.²¹ Indeed, *Fugitive Pieces* provides a long meditation on the way destruction, once started, does not stop.²² Along with Jakob's haunting obsession with what could have happened to his sister and the suffering this creates in his life, the entire story of Ben's relationship with his parents and its repercussions manifests the pervasiveness of the damage done. Take, for example, Ben's father's outrage at Ben throwing away an uneaten-but-rotting apple: hunger in the concentration camp had turned into a pathological obsession concerning food, and he abusively made Ben eat the apple ('You—my son—you throw away food?').²³ Ponder the way that Ben's parents never tell him that he had two older siblings who died in the camps before he was born, and how this secret, kept out of fear, leads to trouble in Ben's marriage when he finds out after his parents die that his mother had told her daughter-in-law.²⁴ Ben laments that you cannot 'separate fear from the body', that 'My

¹⁹ For examples, see FP 39, 45, 76-7, 143. Note also the many passages referring to geological time and the exposure of history in the strata of the earth. One should mark, however, that the connection of the Holocaust to a subterranean world does not occur only with Michaels. Cf. the many memorials, such as in Berlin or Paris, which lead the visitor underground. Even though the Jewish Museum of Berlin is a huge structure, the section commemorating Holocaust victims is, again, underground, as well as in a concrete tower and a garden that feels underground. Memorials in Budapest are not underground, but they are concealed, tucked away in the courtyard of the Great Synagogue, or quietly on the ground beside the river. Perhaps what happened is so horrible that it must be hidden from the light of the sun.

²⁰ In the introduction to BP, Scarry declares that the 'unmaking' half of the book 'is about the way other persons...cease to be visible to us' (22).

²¹ Not that it began with the Nazis. The diminishment of other human beings through the communication of hatred has a long history; in the case of anti-Semitism, this may be exemplified by the gallery devoted to the modern era in Berlin's Jewish Museum: although the room's space is filled by exhibits demonstrating the cultural achievements of Germany's Jewish communities, all along the wall runs a line of small type chronicling anti-Semitic comments of the last few centuries from people across Europe in chronological order.

²² At this point Michaels goes beyond BP: FP makes explicit the trauma of the lingering rot which words can instil, while Scarry's work necessarily focuses on the perpetrators and their immediate victims.

²³ FP 213-8.

²⁴ FP 251-3.

parents' past is mine molecularly': Michaels portrays the diminishment of humanity by the embodied language of violence as something like a congenital disease.²⁵

In the novel, almost nothing and no one is exempt from the way words can harm. Some forces intended to be benign end up twisted: there is the way Jakob's first wife cannot reach him in his world of burdensome history, the way her energy and modernity cannot dissolve his nightmares.²⁶ Alex wants to save him from the shadows of the past, but he comes to believe that her *au courant* lifestyle is unravelling his identity, albeit unwittingly. And while the text is rather ambiguous when it comes to blame—it might just be Jakob's corrupted imagination—Alex still calls him 'Jake' rather than Jakob, as if to signal with his name the person that she wants him to be, not who he is.²⁷ With the cutting of one syllable, language can make a move to erase and change a person's position in the world.

Even the perpetrators of brutalities themselves were caught in the turn of their own lie. 'If the Nazis required that humiliation precede extermination', Jakob ponders,

then they admitted exactly what they worked so hard to avoid admitting: the humanity of the victim. To humiliate is to accept that your victim feels and thinks, that he not only feels pain, but knows that he's being degraded. And because the torturer knew in an instant of recognition that his victim was not a "figuren" but a man, and knew at that same moment he must continue his task, he suddenly understood the Nazi mechanism. Just as the stone-carrier knew his only chance of survival was to fulfil his task as if he didn't know its futility, so the torturer decided to do his job as if he didn't know the lie. The photos capture again and again this chilling moment of choice: the laughter of the damned. When the soldier realized that only death has the power to turn "man" into "figuren," his difficulty was solved.²⁸

The soldiers chose to fulfil the destructive conceit of the language they had been taught, and so compromised their own humanity. They objectified themselves in order to objectify others.²⁹

²⁵ FP 280. This is perhaps a good place to remember that *Fugitive Pieces* is just one individual portrayal, as noted by Adrienne Kertzer in the article, 'Fugitive Pieces: Listening as a Holocaust Survivor's Child'. Kertzer strives to differentiate herself from Ben, who is to her the archetypal child of archetypal Holocaust survivors, in that she views her own childhood as somewhat less traumatic.

²⁶ FP 141.

²⁷ FP 144 and 148.

²⁸ FP 166.

²⁹ Scarry ends her chapter on torture with a discussion of how concentration camp guards and others were able to do what they did, pointing out that torturers bend the focus of their ethical regard to

All of this—all the words which call forth destruction, the ability of words to erase worlds through what they omit from discussion, words which turn a person's eyes away from the body of another—is a desolation of language. This language makes absence, trading on the pain and suffering of the human body. It is all too real, and there are altogether too many examples of how it works. Our words can make a sharp knife against the vulnerability of flesh, and the sheer weight of grief that this creates and maintains is unbearable. The screams of the victims, as Jakob imagines them, are 'somewhere in the galaxy, moving forever towards the psalms'.³⁰ As the world of the body shrinks, its reach dissipates into infinity.

'The power of language to restore'

But then Michaels audaciously suggests that attention to absence, to silence, gives a possibility of restoration, a possibility hinted at by that destination toward which the sufferers' laments yearn. She proposes that poetry (and all that goes with it) constitutes a more constructive side of language. The power of words could be diverted to other means than obliteration. That the same device—language—could offer radically different ends indeed accords with what Elaine Scarry posits in *The Body in Pain*, where she argues that the difference between a weapon and a tool is not in an object's intrinsic make-up but in the way it is used.³¹ When Scarry turns to investigating making, she notes that one problem with any account of making is the difficulty in determining a 'model object'; whereas torture and war easily provide representative examples of the diminishment of humanity, something equally representative for the creative side is much more elusive.³² In other words, because destructive language constricts the world, reducing finitude to an end point, its movement is much easier to track—it seeks to arrest everything in a controlling relationship of power. Creative language, however, by its nature of being open-ended generates ever more language

themselves, worrying about the harm done to them by witnessing or participating in the enforcement of brutality, and so their attention can slip away from the fact that they are injuring another human being (BP 58-9). At this point, Scarry follows Hannah Arendt and Bruno Bettelheim, who both also point to the linguistic deflection from the reality of harm.

³⁰ FP 54.

³¹ BP 173.

³² BP 177.

along with the forms that are being created, making specific examples much harder to grasp. Yet, it is precisely that open-endedness which *Fugitive Pieces* highlights in its content and form. First, the subjects of the events and discourse of the novel include two mechanisms of constructive imagination: creative arts, such as poetry and music; and redemptive love, the potential for a person's world and vision to be expanded in the care of an intimate relationship with another. Second, the novel attempts to manifest the 'power of language to restore' in its own language and form. All of these—form and content, poetry and love—entwine to offer the reader the possibility of participating in adding something new and hopeful to the world—but not easily, not without cost. To make the move towards a recovery of the body, they ask for the paradoxical embracing of absence, acceptance of gaps in what can be known.

Poetry offers Jakob the consolation of searching for the secrets at the heart of the world. But the glimpse of meaning and understanding that poetry presents seeks what cannot be said, strives to address the unknowable and uncontainable. As Jakob reflects:

I felt this was my truth. That my life could not be stored in any language but only in silence; the moment I looked into a room and took in only what was visible, not vanished. The moment I failed to see Bella had disappeared. But I did not know how to seek by way of silence. So I lived a breath apart, a touch-typist who holds his hands above the keys slightly in the wrong place, the words coming out meaningless, garbled. Bella and I inches apart, the wall between us. I thought about writing poems this way, in code, every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language.

If one could isolate that space, that damaged chromosome in words, in an image, then perhaps one could restore order by naming. Otherwise history is only a tangle of wires. So in poems I returned to Biskupin, to the house on Zakynthos, to the forest, to the river, to the burst door, to the minutes in the wall.

English was a sonar, a microscope, through which I listened and observed, waiting to capture elusive meanings buried in facts.³³

This portrays poetry as a tool of diagnosis and discovery, a language which unveils experience and outlines the gaps where both absence and mystery exist. Naming the secrets allows one to relate to them, rather than to possess them and think that you have figured them out. At one point, Athos proposes that a sonnet is like 'the linguistic investigations of the kabbalists'.³⁴ The reference to the Jewish mystical practice, in

³³ FP 111-2.

³⁴ FP 100.

which, at one level, a person seeks to discover the nature of God's presence in creation through a close reading of the language of Torah, suggests a poetics where words illuminate the shadows of our comprehension, yet the instrument of this striving remains that which is solid and visible, language at its most morphological, the straight lines and curves of written letters.³⁵ The new constructions are fragile and more than a little tentative, but they remain new constructions.³⁶ What Jakob suggests with the notion of naming the absence: if one could 'restore order by naming', one could place oneself in a new and better position in a reconstructed world.

Note, however, that Jakob deems himself singularly unsuccessful at the task of trying to 'capture elusive meaning buried in facts'. He says that 'all I achieved was an awkward shrieking'.³⁷ Consolation and revelation do not contain the whole answer for him. But *Fugitive Pieces* does not stop with those two possibilities: poetry also reaches towards love, towards compassion and generosity. All of this comes together in the penultimate chapter of the first part, 'Terra Nullius'.³⁸ In this whirlwind of a chapter, Jakob, his marriage to Alex having disintegrated, seeks refuge in the late Athos's ancestral home on the island of Idhra. Suddenly, a bewildering array of snippets of text weaves together: passages describing Jakob's life on the island, discourses on history and Jewish ethics, reflections on language and poetry, philosophical discussions of Nazism and the Holocaust. Three different strands are in italics: the first, a story about a woman named Zdena who adopts an apparently orphaned girl, is a text with no introduction or explanation; the second constitutes intrusions of Bella's voice as she practises on the piano, at first quite far apart and seeming to be simple memories, but growing in frequency as the chapter progresses until the reader realises that the voice is part of Jakob's imagining of Bella in a concentration camp; the third consists of two sentences embedded in the last two pages, representing Jakob's response.

³⁵ In the book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem discusses the positive attitude of Kabbalism towards language, that the Torah 'is to be regarded as the living incarnation of the divine wisdom which eternally sends out new rays of light', and hints that linguistic analysis means a search for the implications of the name of God written in the world (14, 17). By alluding to such mysticism, Michaels shows the high value she accords to language.

³⁶ In CL 180, Michaels implies that poetry's attempt to generate visibility is a solidifying of shadows, like an image developing on film or 'breath on glass'.

³⁷ FP 112.

³⁸ FP 152-70.

As all of these texts intertwine, imagination's creativity is also being declared. Near the beginning, when Jakob arrives on the island, he starts to explore Athos's family library, and he quotes 'a Hebrew saying: Hold a book in your hand and you're a pilgrim at the gates of a new city'.³⁹ He begins with the psalms, lines from which seem to set off the whole whorl of texts. This is also the chapter when the reader is told that Jakob starts working on what will become his first book of poetry.⁴⁰ He recalls Athos saying to him, 'Write to save yourself...and someday you'll write because you've been saved'.⁴¹ The reading and writing of poetry generate the process of Jakob being able to address his loss fully. In 'Terra Nullius', Jakob's release comes not in a fantasy that his sister remains alive, but in being able to imagine the last moments of those in the camps, that even in their last breaths there could be a whisper of hope, of faith.⁴² He knows that what he has imagined is a composition that he has crafted, but that invention allows a reorientation of body. At the end of the chapter, Jakob is enlightened:

All the years I felt Bella entreating me, filled with her loneliness, I was mistaken. I have misunderstood the signals. Like other ghosts, she whispers; not for me to join her, but so that, when I'm close enough, she can push me back into the world.⁴³

What is restored is not the way things once had been, but the hope that the bereaved can embody life from day to day in the future.⁴⁴

In an interview given the same year that *Fugitive Pieces* was published, Anne Michaels stated that, in the book, 'I wanted to look as closely as I could at how people

³⁹ FP 156.

⁴⁰ FP 164-5.

⁴¹ FP 165.

⁴² In an interview with Branko Gorjup, Michaels spoke of the 'redemption of the future', that 'What a poem can offer is a way of becoming; a poem, language itself, can be a kind of prayer' (3).

⁴³ FP 170.

⁴⁴ The ideas behind the possibilities created by poetry in *Fugitive Pieces* are very reminiscent of the thought of Paul Ricoeur, particularly where Ricoeur talks about poetry (referring to imaginative language) as projecting a world and creating the self of the participant, the reader (see especially the interviews 'Poetry and Possibility', 'The Creativity of Language', and 'Myth as a Bearer of Possible Worlds' in RR, 448-90). Both Ricoeur and Michaels—at least in *Fugitive Pieces*—point to language as re-creating itself, and in that new creation having the ability to teach a person a new way of life (See RR, 454-5 and 462). However, for Ricoeur the emphasis appears to lie with poetry as a more solitary endeavour, between reader and text, with each work generating its own world (RR 459-60), while Michaels depicts poetry's restorative capacity as much more relational. Even when Jakob is sequestered on a Greek island writing poetry, he is never really by himself; he is always accompanied by ghosts.

carry on, or how perhaps they not only carry on but carry an event with them and still move towards a place of love in the world'.⁴⁵ This is the territory of the final chapter in Jakob's story, 'The Gradual Instant'. Here, he meets Michaela, many years his junior, and they fall madly, happily, in love. Their love manifests physically almost from the beginning; it is described in their bodily presence to one another, words outlining the form of their intimacy. Jakob sees Michaela in the details of 'her dark-brown eyes or her small hand disappearing into the shoulder of her dress to adjust a strap', finds that 'the noise of her whole body is in [his] ears', seeks 'fugitive scents' on her flesh in order to 'trace her day' through the herbal remnants of cooking and the sweat from a hot sun.⁴⁶ The reader sees Jakob restored. Though he fears that 'She'll see in my body the terrible things that have marked me', the generosity of her loving embrace transforms him, granting 'Not the stillness of something broken, but of rest', so that he can say, 'Every cell in my body has been replaced, suffused with peace'.⁴⁷ His restoration is a return to the body in wonder and joy.

Although the straightforward physical intimacy of this love may seem entirely different than poetry's power, *Fugitive Pieces* intricately connects them. In the previous chapter, Jakob mentions that 'A poem is as neural as love; the rut of rhythm that veers the mind'.⁴⁸ Both poetry and love thread through the human body.⁴⁹ Jakob muses how

Michaela offers her ancestors to me. I'm shocked at my hunger for her memories. Love feeds on the protein of detail, sucks fact to the marrow; just as there are no generalities in the body, every particular speaking at once until there's such a crying out....⁵⁰

Language's power of restoration manifests in the depiction of a very particular embodiment of love. Thus, Jakob can 'cross over the boundary of skin into Michaela's memories'.⁵¹ He can talk of the way 'asleep, the pressure of Michaela's leg against

⁴⁵ Anne Michaels, interview by Douglas Fetherling 241.

⁴⁶ FP 175, 180, and 191.

⁴⁷ FP 179, 181, and 182.

⁴⁸ FP 163.

⁴⁹ In CL 183, Michaels writes that 'We disappear into all the details of love; the body can't get enough specifics. The poem has the same capacity: details, down to breath'.

⁵⁰ FP 179.

⁵¹ FP 185.

mine translates into a dream as warmth, sunlight'.⁵² Everything dissolves into the poetry and love between bodies, what they declare to the world.

The body itself, as a site of memory and relationship, becomes a poem. In *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob's last recorded words are:

My son, my daughter: May you never be deaf to love.
Bela, Bella: Once I was lost in a forest. I was so afraid. My blood
pounded in my chest and I knew my heart's strength would soon be
exhausted. I saved myself without thinking. I grasped the two syllables
closest to me, and replaced my heartbeat with your name.⁵³

Here, Jakob looks forward to the child he yearns to have. He puts a name, puts language, at the heart of things, so that the cadence of his life speaks; his body's restoration in love with Michaela links the past—the traumatic loss of Bella the beloved sister—to the future—the possibility of Bela/Bella, a child who would be shaped by love.⁵⁴ If, for Elaine Scarry, the making of the world involves an extension of sentience into the external world through such activities as the fashioning of artefacts, for Michaels's Jakob, this extension of sentience comes in the form of the projection of new life, the hope of a child and all of that child's possibilities.⁵⁵ In both, creativity means adding to the surfeit of the world, and expanding life's reach. Jakob does not forget the ones who are gone, but the grace of life with Michaela turns his face towards hope.

Body, Earth, Memory: A Form of Restorative Language

Waterworn, the body remembers
like a floodplain, sentiment-laden,
reclaims itself with every tide.
Memory terraces, soft as green deltas.
Or reefs and cordilleras—
gathering the world to bone.⁵⁶

⁵² FP 194.

⁵³ FP 195.

⁵⁴ This link of past to future in a name stands in accordance with an Ashkenazi custom in which, while you never name a child after a living relative 'in case the angel of death gets confused', you do name a child after an honoured family member who has died, to keep their memory alive. My thanks to Alana Vincent for pointing this out to me.

⁵⁵ See BP 280f.

⁵⁶ SD 5.

Through an intricate complex of metaphors and imaginative constructions, Michaels depicts memory as embodied by human beings and by natural processes in the earth. Related to this is the sense that what happens to the body in the forces between people and the forces of nature impinge upon the remembered narratives of human lives. Artistically, the use of tropes such as metaphors and similes generates an imagined world where the boundaries between body, memory, and earth become unstable and the categories blur together. Yet, their boundaries never completely elide, and the tension between categories being simultaneously held apart and pulled together sparks a dynamic vitality which makes the text deeply sensual. That this relational vitality cannot finally be arrested produces the depth and strength of the bond between body and story in *Fugitive Pieces*. This sensuality of language in the novel becomes a key site for demonstrating the power of language to restore; it represents an attempt to evoke new possibilities for life out of the soil of death and the unruliness of bodies.

At one level, ‘body’ and ‘earth’ are tied together by the virtue of both being material entities. In *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels depicts a world where humanity and nature intermingle not just because human beings walk through an environment, but because the boundaries between bodies are porous. She writes that ‘Human memory is encoded in air currents and river sediment’, and that ‘Eskers of ash wait to be scooped up, lives reconstituted’; the human heart is ‘the size and heaviness of a handful of earth’; stones are given the power ‘to hold human time’ and also contain ‘organic history’ in the geological processes that fuse them together deep underground.⁵⁷ Yet, the meaning of these images is not made explicit; there is no code that allows one to decipher the thematic direction of the text. Instead, by way of literary alchemy, a reader may leap through the presenting phenomena to uncover underlying motives or construct enlightening truths. A reader may note that image of ‘eskers of ash’ and recall that an esker is a ridge of detritus left by retreating glaciation, a landform created by what once would have seemed inexorable but since has disappeared—and then be offered possible conclusions about the glacier-like force of Nazism which deposited that ash, the remains of human beings. A reader may see the connection between a heart and a fistful of earth, and think about the solidity of what makes a human being, the connection to the dust from which we are said to come, and more.

⁵⁷ FP 53, 113, 32.

This is, in many ways, the language of a poet—not just of Anne Michaels, but of the protagonist Jakob—who regards all the world as replete with meaning. Thus, a favoured poetic device in the novel is anthropomorphism. The earth remembers; the petrification of organic matter narrates a story. Hills experience ‘grief’; Jakob’s poetry makes people ‘hear the earth speak’.⁵⁸ Ben traces this to Athos, whom he calls ‘a splendid anthropomorphist’ to whom ‘there [was] no thing that does not yearn’.⁵⁹ However, the novel also employs a technique opposite to anthropomorphism, what might be called ‘geomorphism’: applying natural processes metaphorically to human beings. This is apparent from the first line of the book: ‘Bog-boy, I surfaced from the miry streets of the drowned city’.⁶⁰ Not only does the novel invoke the image of those bodies found preserved in peat bogs, it also points out the process by which the bodies were preserved through sacrifice while the remains those who sacrificed them did not survive. The bodies had waited out their killers, aided by the powers of the earth.⁶¹ Michaels alludes carefully to scientific processes. For example, she has Jakob muse that ‘Athos replaced parts of me slowly, as if he were preserving wood’ referring to a process in which tissue is chemically altered, but in such a way as not to damage the shape of an entity, not to obliterate its memory.⁶² Again, these are actions extending over time, over a person’s own history, particularly as they connect with social and collective memory. In Ben’s part, history is said ‘to grow in you until you’re silted up and can’t move’.⁶³ A person, as a being in history and carrying memory, is shown to be inextricably tied to the earth, as if our feet grow roots, and are simultaneously nourished and poisoned by the time in which we flow.

⁵⁸ FP 60, 209. This comment mirrors a passage in the first part of the book when Jakob says that ‘In the holy ground of mass graves, the earth blistered and spoke’ (143). It is as if Ben bolsters the thoughts of the readers of the novel, allowing you to think, ‘Yes, I noticed the anthropomorphism.’ Yet, by doing so, the text tricks the reader into assuming that such readings are what the author (Michaels) wants, making it easy to forget that Ben’s comments are the comments of another character within the novel. The technique thickens the text, adding a depth of time and hence believability; it is also exemplifies the novel’s form, which is discussed later in this chapter.

⁵⁹ FP 209.

⁶⁰ FP 5.

⁶¹ FP 49.

⁶² FP 144. The reference is set in opposition to what Jakob believes his first wife is doing to him, that she wants to change him by setting fire to him, purging him of the dark pain of his memories.

⁶³ FP 243.

But if we are connected to the earth in the world of *Fugitive Pieces*, we are also connected to one another through that earth, over a bridge of nature. Jakob writes:

When the prisoners were forced to dig up the mass graves, the dead entered them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and hearts. And through their blood into another generation. Their arms were into death up to the elbows, but not only into death—into music, into a memory of the way a husband or son leaned over his dinner, a wife’s expression as she watched her child in the bath; into beliefs, mathematical formulas, dreams. As they felt another man’s and another’s blood-soaked hair through their fingers, the diggers begged forgiveness. And those lost lives made molecular passage into their hands.⁶⁴

Thus earth and body and memory are linked: they flow into and among each other in the coexistence of pain and preservation. Looking from one angle, you see the inevitability of nature; peering from another, you see choice, a conscious will to remember, to hold the stories of the dead in one’s own body. It is not just that body and earth are a continuum where truth shows itself from somewhere beyond; it is that our relationships bear out in the interconnections of nature and humanity. We learn our relationships, and thus ourselves and others, in a narrative manner. We know by memory.

‘Every moment is two moments.’ This is one of the refrains pulsing through *Fugitive Pieces*.⁶⁵ Every experience leads to another, to a memory, to a possible future, to what is happening elsewhere. These double moments are solid; they are embodied. For Jakob, every touch recalls another.⁶⁶ He cries out:

I long for memory to be spirit, but fear it is only skin. I fear that knowledge becomes instinct only to disappear with the body. For it is my body that remembers them, and though I have tried to erase Alex from my senses, tried to will my parents and Bella from my sleep, this will amounts to nothing, for my body betrays me in a second. I have lived many years without them. Yet it’s the same winter afternoon that draws Bella close, so close I can feel her powerful hand on my own, feel her gentle fingers on my back, so close I can smell Mrs. Alperstein’s lotion, so close I feel my father’s hand and Athos’s hand on my head and my mother’s hand pulling down my jacket to straighten me out, so close I can feel Alex’s arms reaching around me from behind, and upon me

⁶⁴ FP 52.

⁶⁵ FP 140, 143, 161. Cf. also the many places throughout the book where two moments blur, superimposed upon one another; for example, how Jakob reflects on parallel images, how the sight of Athos doing something makes him think of the lost members of his family doing something similar (18-9).

⁶⁶ FP 144-6, for example.

her maddeningly open eyes even as she disappears into sensation, and suddenly I'm afraid, and turn around in empty rooms.⁶⁷

The ghosts that haunt a person do so precisely with the impressions they leave upon the body, touches from elsewhere or other times which similar contact can evoke, or moments engrained in the habits of flesh. The absent beloved becomes a part of you, precisely in the absence; that is, what Jakob describes is a physical yearning for the other.

In presenting such a world, where truth dwells in the complexity of material impressions, *Fugitive Pieces* generates a place of imagination where meaning is found in constant reference from one body to another, one time to another. The way relationships matter is exposed for the reader's reflection, and the language invites the reader to engage in the play of language, to pit imagination against desolation. The turn from the diminishing, destructive power of language to a restoration through creativity is intended to be beautiful through making love 'necessary'.⁶⁸

One might, however, be forgiven for feeling uneasy at such a neatly optimistic conclusion. Poetic world-making and the bonds of intimate love do not seem like much of a response to the immense weight and horrible finality of all the obliteration of bodies charted in the novel. Does Michaels mean to suggest that one individual's move back into the world can balance the violent silencing of so many in the Holocaust? Such disquietude leads to the main criticisms which have been directed towards the *Fugitive Pieces*. Many critics refer to Theodor Adorno's declaration that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.⁶⁹ Méira Cook disparages Michaels's writing as too metaphorical, too 'lush' with wordplay and beautiful imagery: Cook declares of certain imagery in *Fugitive Pieces* that it 'provides a highly romanticized icon of what actually happened' so that 'Michaels unwittingly conceals the decidedly unpoetic nature of genocide'.⁷⁰ Of a love scene between Jakob and Michaela, Cook continues:

⁶⁷ FP 170.

⁶⁸ '[T]o make love necessary' is the prime lesson that Jakob believes Athos imparted to him (FP 121).

⁶⁹ Qtd. in D. M. R. Bentley, 'Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*' 5 and Méira Cook, 'At the Membrane of Language and Silence: Metaphor and Memory in *Fugitive Pieces*' 12. Referred to in Kertzer, 'Listening', 200, 207 and 216n. The last two also refer to Adorno's revision of his statement, though only in their notes.

⁷⁰ Cook 16.

When such metaphorically (over)lush language is used to express the romantic subplot, no contrast between form and content is possible and this failure results in a sentimental discourse....Perhaps the point is that when metaphoric language is used indiscriminately to represent both eyewitness account and romantic experience, the reader fails to distinguish between the relative importance assigned to each.⁷¹

Nicola King writes that, in *Fugitive Pieces*, language—referring, apparently, in broad terms to ‘the powers of storytelling, of poetry, of love and the sharing of memory’—‘is often foregrounded at the expense of “what it’s describing”’, and believes that Michaels’s use of metaphors drawn from the natural world ‘mystifies human agency and offers moments of false consolation’.⁷² Adrienne Kertzer criticises the way ‘Michaels risks adopting a narrative strategy that tends...to distract and console many readers with the “beauty” of her story, the pleasure of her intensely woven language’, and speaks of ‘find[ing] Michaels’s redemptive “faith of the body”...only more evidence of Langer’s insight into our continuing need to invent consoling lessons in Holocaust narratives’.⁷³ Even an almost thoroughly positive assessment, such as that by Annick Hillger, asks, ‘Does justice forever belong to the realm of *utopia*?’⁷⁴ In some way or other, all of these critiques wonder if poetry and love have any real transformative power.

To some extent, much of this criticism reflects a tendency to be suspicious of any serious possibilities of literary discourse concerning love. For instance, Cook’s account minimises the role of love in the novel by referring to ‘the romantic *subplot*’ and implying that ‘romantic experience’ naturally cannot be as momentous as that part of the narrative discussing historic trauma. And if, to some of the critics, love connotes little more than a sense of whimsy, for several the place of poetic, metaphorical language in grappling with the depths of historical atrocity and evil is marked by outright scepticism. Note that, to King, metaphor ‘mystifies’. It is as if, instead of metaphor’s multiplication of meaning, where the Holocaust is concerned only the

⁷¹ Cook 17.

⁷² Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* 126-7, 147, 121.

⁷³ Kertzer, ‘Listening’, 203 and 211. The reference to Langer is to Lawrence L. Langer, author and editor of many books about the Holocaust and culture, including *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays*, and *Preempting the Holocaust*.

⁷⁴ Annick Hillger, ““Afterbirth of Earth”: Messianic Materialism in Anne Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*” 35. Emphasis in original.

starkness of clarity is adequate or, better yet, the admission that the representation of this clarity is impossible. To me, though, Kertzer's misgivings are the sharpest: does *Fugitive Pieces* merely represent a misguided attempt to make some meaning, some hope, out of what can only be an abyss, an aporia of irredeemable suffering, demeaning the victims by treating them as a lesson for future humankind? Does the book mislead readers into believing that creative imagination can transform the world for the better when it is really only words and love is not enough?⁷⁵

Yet, against simple readings, the novel itself subverts any simplicity of happy endings. The very first page tells us that Jakob and his wife die after being hit by a car, that they die childless: the hopes lit up by the end of the first part seem to have no fruition.⁷⁶ The second part ends with Ben returning to Canada to attempt a reunion with his wife, Naomi, after they had been separated—great for Ben, but the reader only sees things from his point of view, and there is no telling whether his wife will even want him back.⁷⁷ Ben's story itself is a response to Jakob's life, to the place of love and peace that the poet had reached; however, a close reading will see that, perhaps, that route to that place is not so easy to discern after all. Ben proclaims, in his narrative which is addressed to the late Jakob:

I wanted to believe language itself had freed you. But the night we met I knew it wasn't language that had released you. Only a remarkably simple truth or a remarkably simple lie could put such peace in a man.⁷⁸

Poetic language, it would seem, is not simple enough; moreover, after noticing the powerful effect that a compliment from Jakob has on Naomi, Ben finalises his judgement on language's ability to restore with a curtly dismissive sentence: 'As if talk could actually heal'.⁷⁹ As for love, Ben waves away its power, saying that 'Even

⁷⁵ Michaels is by no means alone in being open to such criticism. Paul Ricoeur, for example, also faces such scepticism. In the interview entitled 'Poetry and Possibility' he is asked about the hypothetical case of 'an SS man, who might have loved the poetry of Rilke', but who was not changed by that art, did not stop perpetrating crimes against humanity; in other words, where is the power of poetry to transform there (RR, 454)? I imagine some critics would raise the same issue with Scarry's BP, pointing out that she appears to counter torture and war with a beautifully fashioned chair, among other things.

⁷⁶ FP 1. If the critics note the deaths of Jakob and Michaela, they tend not to regard the events as impinging upon the happy ending.

⁷⁷ FP 294.

⁷⁸ FP 207.

⁷⁹ FP 208.

Naomi, who thinks love has an answer for everything, knows that that's the real response to history—to say 'screw you': because even love cannot find the dead.⁸⁰ Going beyond what Ben says, the events of his story also suggest that love does not always redeem easily. Apparently trying to replicate Jakob's discovery of new life with Michaela, Ben also attempts to find wholeness in love at first sight, having an affair with a younger woman while separated from Naomi. However, the romance with Petra does not turn out as well for him as Jakob's life with Michaela had gone; a few months of passion end with Petra ransacking Jakob's old house, where Ben was staying, and leaving when Ben stops her. Saddened and alone, Ben recalls an old friend's words and agrees: 'The body...fools us perfectly'.⁸¹ Overall, the way Michaels frames the story of Jakob Beer undermines any idea that the consolation provided by beauty and physical love conquers all.⁸²

Although Michaels uses metaphor and other devices liberally, she simultaneously ironises such poetic technique. She has Jakob proclaim that 'It's no metaphor to feel the influence of the dead in the world, just as it's no metaphor to hear the radiocarbon chronometer, the Geiger counter amplifying the faint breathing of rock, fifty thousand years old'.⁸³ Suffering repudiates metaphorical distance—you cannot stand apart from it, yet you must. This enhances the instability of the text, undermining the readers' ability to take positions on what type of text they are reading. In the end, bodies bleed into earth and earth into bodies; while the physical processes of the earth betray a cosmic memory, the earth also records memory because it holds the trace of other bodies. The bodies buried in the ground, from bog-people to Holocaust victims to those beloved by the novel's protagonists, make that ground holy in the repository of memory—holy through the trace of what and who is absent.

Yet, the matter does not end here. Michaels does suggest an answer to the perceivable impasse, a way to continue to maintain a transformative role for creative imagination and the language that goes with it; the answer may be brought into focus

⁸⁰ FP 242.

⁸¹ FP 282.

⁸² Certainly, Anne Michaels does not suffer any illusions that literary art can make everything right; she has written that 'Great poems are steeped in failure' and that 'A real power of words...is that it makes our ignorance more precise' (CL 182 and 178).

⁸³ FP 53.

with the help of Elaine Scarry: if, as noted above, the unmaking of the world ‘is about the way that other persons...cease to be visible to us’, then the making of the world concerns the way other people *become* visible, ‘about the way that we make ourselves...available to one another’.⁸⁴ In *Fugitive Pieces*, in the dark of ‘Terra Nullius’, after we read of the reduction of human beings to ‘figuren’, we hear Jakob assert that

There were the few, like Athos, who chose to do good at great personal risk; those who never confused objects and humans, who knew the difference between naming and the named. Because the rescuers couldn’t lose sight, literally, of the human, again and again they give us the same explanation for their heroism: “What choice did I have?”⁸⁵

Here, too, the making of the world, the secret of truly creative imagination, is the way people are visible to one another. Therefore, the power of poetry to restore lies precisely in its power to render other people—and all the realm of their imagination—visible in such a way that you cannot deny or diminish their humanity. Language has power exactly where it is linked to action and a mode of being, to being available to others, for others, like Athos, like Michaela, like Jakob learns to be. Love is not a fluffy subplot, but an example of the actualisation of hopeful language in the body. Michaels makes of poetry an ethical obligation: if you can see the other, you must act to help the other, any turning away becomes wilful disregard. The necessity of love equals the necessity of others; indeed, why else would Jakob write his memoirs—he has reached that place of love, he could shy ever so much away from the pains of the past—except as an ethical offering?

At the end of *The Body in Pain*, Scarry summarises her argument by suggesting that imagination points to what is essentially the generosity of making: she writes ‘that the imagination is bound up with compassion [...] has an inherent tendency towards largesse and excess’ and that its work is ‘continuous’ and ‘ongoing’.⁸⁶ The poetic imagination, and love, cannot make up for what evils have been done, and certainly cannot forgive them, but do imply the way of justice, a way of seeing and acting. Not that this is foolproof, but that it offers a possibility. Michaels, in ‘Cleopatra’s Love’, writes that ‘ultimately the poem itself is a loose net, a sieve, both unviable and durable

⁸⁴ BP 22.

⁸⁵ FP 167.

⁸⁶ BP 325.

as a physical object: a web of molecules that gives the illusion of wholeness'.⁸⁷ Creative imagination, in poetry and in love, may catch you in their net, wake you up, change the way you see. Not just in what is said, but in how. *Fugitive Pieces* is that loose net, relying on what the reader makes of it, but also 'bound up with compassion', so that, if what it says is unstable, the way it says it offers in its form a possibility for restoration, for the complexity of hope, for the reader.

A Lesson in Form; or, Reading Ben Reading Jakob

Try to keep everything and keep
standing. In the tall grass,
ten thousand shadows. What's past,
all you've been,
will continue its half-life,
a carbon burn searing its way to heaven
through the twisted core of a pine.
At night, memory will roam your skin.⁸⁸

Reflecting on the nature of poetry and epistemology, Michaels has written that

the poem attempts to represent as many layers of experience as possible—unified without loss of complexity—and with luck, manages to capture an instant partially, suggestive of the whole. This is perhaps more faithful to experience than we immediately think, for our knowledge is always partial—in both senses of the word. We rely on our perceptions and the perceptions of others; we never learn the whole story but assume instead that truth lies somewhere hidden among these perceptions.⁸⁹

A living and vibrant sense of reality is created by a fictive sleight of hand; poets provide as much representation of reality as they can, and the perceiver's mind fills in the gaps. *Fugitive Pieces* follows this strategy, presenting pieces of the lives of its protagonists for discerning readers to collect and assemble. The author's choice of first-person narration for both parts of the book further heightens the 'partial' nature of the narrative(s). The reader first learns of events through Jakob's memoirs, then through Ben's reminiscences and reflections, ostensibly made while he is in an airplane

⁸⁷ CL 181.

⁸⁸ From 'Last Night's Moon', SD 24.

⁸⁹ CL 179. Whether knowingly or not, this echoes work on feminist epistemology, such as that of Donna Haraway on situated knowledges (which I discuss in the conclusion to Part One above).

returning from Greece to Toronto; a third voice comes in the form of the introductory note, which feels like the work of an editor or historian. As a writer, Michaels has made a specialty of imagining the voices of others; apart from the novel, a large proportion of her poems could be classed as poetic monologues given by characters historical and imagined.⁹⁰ Her protagonists in *Fugitive Pieces* offer their perceptions, slightly different, a little off from one another, causing careful readers to begin to wonder if the narrators can be trusted; ironically, this questioning probably adds to the realism of the text rather than detracting from it. The technique of having two separate narrators generates a dense referential network within the book; the overlay of multiple layers within the text(s) contributes a great depth to the imagined world that Michaels is constructing.⁹¹

But even this is too simple an account of *Fugitive Pieces*. The book does not give its two parts equal weight. Ben's story comes after Jakob's not only chronologically but thematically as well. Part II of *Fugitive Pieces* could be read as a very long letter addressed to the dead poet of the first part—Jakob is the 'you' of Ben's narrative—and forms a very specific echo, response to and reprise of Jakob's memoirs. Sometimes Ben works this recapitulation very consciously, replying to his own experience of what Jakob said, wrote or did, or to reports about Jakob. At other times, the reverberations are more subtle, embedded in Ben's actions and observations and apparently unnoticed by the character, forming clues to be picked up by the reader. In

⁹⁰ In her books of poetry, Michaels writes from the point of view of such historical personages as Johannes Kepler, Karen Blixen, and Kathleen Scott, wife of the Antarctic explorer. Many of her poems are first-person narratives, just as in FP; the reader is often left quite unsure whether the voice is meant to be Michaels's own or a character that she has imagined—or both. Perhaps her skill as a writer may be seen in the way critics react to her writing, particularly the ones who say that it is too metaphorical: most write as if the words meant to be Jakob's or Ben's are what Michaels believe; none that I have found spare much time to consider what it means that the voices they are hearing are carefully constructed, or that the voices are meant to be partial perceptions of history, memory, and the world.

⁹¹ Elaine Scarry, in another work, *Dreaming by the Book*, discusses the techniques of the human mind for imagining complex images, and how writers use such techniques to teach readers how to imagine. Although Scarry writes particularly about the depiction of images such as birds flying or the movement of skaters, her argument that writers 'get us to move pictures in our minds' by overlapping many different images that are partially imagined to various degrees seems very similar to what Michaels is doing with narrative voice (see Scarry, *Dreaming* 74). The work of the imagination engages the reader as a participant and partner in creativity.

all of this, Jakob's tale remains the central story of the novel.⁹² The question becomes, what then is the purpose of Ben's narrative?

I believe that Ben's story, this response to Jakob's, shapes a thought experiment, a lesson in form. Ben's story is an example of how readers can learn from Jakob's story a little of what to do with the body. Michaels offers her readers a possibility of poetry as that 'power of language to restore'. Not that Ben necessarily gets the reading right: as we shall see, there are plenty of occasions when Michaels appears to be showing that Ben misreads Jakob's story, sometimes disastrously. However, this demonstrates that the possibilities which the form of the book engenders are neither static nor closed where readers are concerned; readers are free partners in creative imagination, even if that means that we may go awry.⁹³ Overall, the form of *Fugitive Pieces*, its body, seeks to make its story a pointer to truth by enlisting its readers in a continuous spiral of expanding meaning and the extension of its questions concerning the relations of the body.

The basic events of Ben's story echo Jakob's. Ben's childhood emerges from the traumatic effects of violence, as does Jakob's; the memory of the past becomes a heavy, formative burden. Both seek the consolation and understanding of literary art, and both enjoin the natural world to provide metaphors to illuminate the meaning of events.⁹⁴ Both have close relationships with two women: where Jakob has Alex and Michaela, Ben has Naomi and Petra. The movement of Ben from Toronto to Idhra follows upon

⁹² That this is the case is confirmed by the recent film adaptation, in which Ben's story is reduced to a subplot and Ben himself to a minor character, a neighbour of Jakob and Athos in the apartment in which they live, almost an adopted member of their family. Most of the details of Ben's traumatised family life become slighter allusions and a feeling of menace noticed by Jakob, and Ben's interest in Jakob's serenity comes out mainly in a conversation they have after Ben's father has committed suicide. In the film, Ben and Naomi receive the honour of introducing Jakob to Michaela; Ben's subplot serves to help flesh out the characterisation of Jakob.

⁹³ Ben's misreading of Jakob's story—as demonstrated in things Ben does not know (but the reader does) or gets wrong, as well as how Ben appropriates the poet's story—makes him an unreliable narrator. See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 273-8 for a discussion on how unreliable narrators affect the reading of fiction. Booth observes that authors presenting a reader with an unreliable narrator generate suspicion concerning what the narration communicates; this suspicion, in turn, helps to put emotional distance between the author and the narrator. Following Booth's theories, this distance has two probable functions in FP: first, the distance reduces the story's sentimentality, which quite possibly would have been overwhelming if the novel had ended at the close of Part One, with Jakob restored by love; second, it helps to generate in readers some sympathy for the complex character of Ben, humanising, in his ignorance and fallibility, someone whose actions do not promote a sympathetic response.

⁹⁴ Jakob follows Athos's interest in geology; Ben is interested in the ungraspable instability of weather as shown in meteorology.

Jakob's similar movement, each case being a leaving of a relationship as well; and Ben's motivation for going relies upon Jakob's story in that Ben travels in search of Jakob's memoirs. The structure of the second part in terms of chapters also demonstrates the relationship between it and its predecessor, as each of the chapter titles in the second part is a repeat of a chapter title in the first part.⁹⁵ At one point, Ben admits that 'aftermath fascinated me', and while this refers to a childhood interest in abandoned buildings and industrial artefacts, it could refer just as much to his interest in Jakob.⁹⁶ By the time the reader reaches Greece with Ben, he is peppering his own story with quotations from Jakob's poetry and other work. He writes that

Your poems from those few years with Michaela, poems of a man who feels, for the first time, a future. Your words and your life no longer separate, after *decades of hiding in your skin*.
You sat on this terrace at this table, and wrote as if every man lives this way.⁹⁷

When you read this, you get the feeling that Ben is about to attempt to be that 'every man', to try to find a future for himself just like Jakob did. Indeed, that he applies to Petra lines of Jakob's poetry which were inspired by Michaela indicates that Ben wants Petra to be his Michaela, wants to be restored with a new love.⁹⁸ Michaels even has Ben trace Petra's identity bodily during sex in a manner reminiscent of the way Jakob describes his discovery of Michaela's person through touch; only, Ben's account is much shorter and far less accomplished than the poet's.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ The chapters, in order, are:

Part I	Part II
The Drowned City	The Drowned City
The Stone-Carriers	Vertical Time
Vertical Time	Phosphorus
The Way Station	The Way Station
Phosphorus	
Terra Nullius	
The Gradual Instant	

⁹⁶ FP 228. See also Ben's response to Jakob and Michaela's house on Idhra in Part II's version of 'Vertical Time'. He treats it like a museum, saying that it 'did possess the silence that is the wake of a monumental event' (267).

⁹⁷ FP 267. The italics are in the original, and represent a quotation from Jakob's work.

⁹⁸ See FP 274-7.

⁹⁹ FP 276. Cf. pp 180-3, and, in fact, the entirety of 'The Gradual Instant', for Jakob's embodied approach to Michaela.

The derivative nature of Ben's attempt to reprise Jakob's successful restoration comes through in so many ways. The reader gets a hint that Ben's copying is not perfect from a change in order of the chapter titles, and the omission of some altogether. Michaels further raises suspicions through the depiction of Ben misreading aspects of Jakob's life; an obvious example occurs when Ben finds a copy of Pliny's *Natural History* in the kitchen of the house on Idhra and assumes that it is 'obviously mislaid', while readers know that, during the war, Athos had used Pliny's text as a cookbook, and the reference to it shows a continuing connection between the life of Jakob and Michaela and Jakob's debt of gratitude to his foster-father.¹⁰⁰ Not only is Ben's perception partial, but it is not always correct and, once such errors are noticed, how much of Ben's account can be trusted? Michaels's ironic touch also works to undermine Ben. For instance, the incident of Ben reading Michaela's Master's thesis on ethics in museology finds him learning about the tragic figure of 'Minik, the Greenland Inuit who was turned into a living exhibit at the American Natural History Museum' only to find that his father's remains were there, too, for everyone to see; despite being moved by the story, Ben never sees any connection to what he is doing, to how he—no matter how lovingly—is ransacking the home of the dead for his own desire to inhabit their lives.¹⁰¹ But most of all, Ben's story is problematised by the fact that Petra is not Michaela (and, for that matter, Naomi is not Alex), notwithstanding how much Ben wishes it to be otherwise. Arguably, Petra matches up better with Alex, and Naomi with Michaela, in terms of the way they attend to the past; both Naomi and Michaela give compassionate attention, while Petra and Alex, though they are not unkind, are not as interested in a restoration of what is remembered as part of their relationships.¹⁰² To be fair, though, it is Ben who reads the story incorrectly, just as he reads people incorrectly, if he bothers to try: he is so wrapped up in his misreading of Jakob's story and the fantasy that he builds from it, that he does not really listen as Petra tells him

¹⁰⁰ FP 265. For Athos's use of Pliny's text during the war, see 38. The incident also shows the partiality of Ben's views in that, for the most part, he does not pay attention to Athos's part in Jakob's life; he does not know the whole story.

¹⁰¹ FP 262.

¹⁰² Like Michaela, Naomi is open to the wounds of the past, offering the consolation of presence; note how Michaela listens to the whole story of Bella, and how Naomi becomes a confidant for her mother-in-law (e.g., FP 182, 233-4, 247-9). Alex is, at best, indifferent to history's burden (as discussed earlier), and Petra is, after all, a young twenty-two-year-old woman, perhaps a university student, unsure of what to do with her life and travelling through Europe (276-7).

about herself.¹⁰³ If the body ‘fools you perfectly’, the stories you carry can do the same; if Ben’s narrative is an echo of Jakob’s, the echo resonates slightly askew.

Near the end of Jakob’s memoirs—the part he is able to finish before he gets hit by a car—he writes that

There’s no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence. Memory dies unless it’s given a use. Or as Athos might have said: If one no longer has land but has the memory of land, then one can make a map.¹⁰⁴

Jakob’s text, his account of himself and his relations, becomes the map which he offers, to his hoped-for children, to any reader. The map describes a possible route for the body in the world, a way for memory to be sublimated in flesh, that can assist when you need to make decisions of touch and physical contact. This map can help keep other persons visible to you—only you still have to read it properly. Anne Michaels constructs the whole of *Fugitive Pieces*, with its various voices, with the frame around Jakob’s memoirs, with Ben’s response to the life of the peaceful other he has encountered, as a reading of the map; Ben’s reprise itself is a possible reading, a case of attempting to be attuned to the constructive powers of language. Yet, Ben does not quite know what to do with his compass; his navigational choices lead him to squander love, to look without seeing and listen without hearing. The thing is, even though his narrative is, in so many ways, a misreading, with it Michaels still shows that creative power of language: a misreading is nonetheless something new, and becomes part of the narrative chain. By the end, Ben seems to understand that he has taken a wrong turn somewhere. *Seems to understand*: we, the readers, do not know for sure. Does Ben reunite with Naomi? Just how will the book inform our own perceptions of the world? Readers get to decide where to go, how to follow the map. Among the other images of earth and body, memory and maps, *Fugitive Pieces* offers the image of the fourteenth-century Catalan Atlas which, instead of filling in unknown regions with mythic monsters, left them blank, naming them ‘simply and frighteningly Terra Incognita, challenging every

¹⁰³ FP 277. That Ben is a careless reader is also implied by the way that, even after he has found Jakob’s memoirs, after Petra’s leaving and before Ben heads back to Canada, he does not read the manuscripts carefully enough to note where he gets things wrong. Of course, the chronology of Ben and the composition of his narrative is unclear—is the reader to think of Ben writing out his monologue to Jakob’s ghost as he goes along, or all at the end, while he is on the plane?—but his carelessness still comes out in errors in the composition or a failure to revise.

¹⁰⁴ FP 193.

mariner who unfurled the chart'.¹⁰⁵ Readers opening the book are challenged by the blank spaces, the fugitive pieces, and we must explore them for ourselves, constructing an edifice of the imagination as we chart our routes among the vulnerabilities of flesh. As with Ben, there is no guarantee that we will always get things right. But don't worry—we are well taught what to do with the body.

Conclusion

There is a way our bodies
are not our own, and when he finds her
there is room at last
for everyone they love,
the place he finds,
she finds, each word of skin
a decision.¹⁰⁶

In its dense network of metaphor, imagery, narrative fragments and partial perceptions, *Fugitive Pieces* links its many parts and many levels into a nest for the imagination. The thematic interest in the materiality of memory and language, in the body and earth and organic transformation, not only extends throughout the prose in terms of the content but also is performed in the structure and form of the work. Jakob narrates his story in his memoirs; Ben reflects on Jakob's story, trying to adopt his restoration of the pieces of his life; readers must negotiate the path between them, making their own attempts to knit together the fragments, to choose an interpretation of the body. This makes perfect sense: if words are objects, if memory is carried in skin and bone, rocks and wind, then the shape of the text most certainly should also carry the imprint of what the writer is trying to say. Michaels asks her readers to pay attention to that shape. The texture of the book calls for a response of dwelling within the silences and absences; you receive impressions of characters—of people—and are offered the responsibility to imagine their lives.¹⁰⁷ Because the perceptions which are given are partial, the net of imagination which is the entirety of the work can pick up where

¹⁰⁵ FP 136-7

¹⁰⁶ Michaels, from 'Into Arrival', SD, 13-4.

¹⁰⁷ A responsibility mentioned both by Ben and in words from one of Jakob's texts that Ben quotes (FP 221 and 279).

questions arise in the plot; when you wonder if poetry and love actually can restore life in response to the deadly power of language to obliterate, the form of the book turns the questions back to you, asking you to see what the attempt might produce. In the process of looking for artistic truth, readings spin out many meanings, an excess, a generosity.

Fugitive Pieces shows that the shape of a body—artistic or otherwise—resists any move to look beyond or behind the form for the real truth. Moves which treat the material merely as the medium for something else ignore the way a multiplicity of voices meet at the point of the body, and that such multiplicity cannot be explained away or simplified: the complexity, in its creation of density, is what makes the whole feel real. You can never perceive the totality even of your own body, let alone of all the world which touches upon your body, and what you do perceive cannot always be anticipated. Partial perceptions and perspectives are grounded in the place of the body, oriented by the direction in which your situation points you, so that you are always missing something, the blind spot which you cannot see, the area from which you are turned away. This may seem like an obscuration, a darkening of clarity with shadows, but it is the shadows which provide depth. You need the different perspectives, the different voices, to get a better picture; you need the help of others.

For Anne Michaels and her writing, this means that beauty, love, and necessity flow into one another. ‘The poem,’ she writes, ‘like love, is consciousness made flesh’.¹⁰⁸ To know poetically is to know bodily; love, and grief, can only be described in terms of the body—in terms of bodies in relationship, to be more precise. As Jakob says, ‘All grief, anyone’s grief...is the weight of a sleeping child’.¹⁰⁹ In response to that bodily knowing, we are asked to be partners in making the world. We are asked to remember, to re-create, to be part of restoration. This is connected to an insight that Naomi, the character who quietly tries to do nothing but love, gives:

The only thing you can do for the dead is to sing to them. The hymn, the mirolay, the kaddish. In the ghettos, when a child died, the mother sang a lullaby. Because there was nothing else she could offer of herself, of her body. She made it up, a song of comfort, mentioning all the child’s favourite toys. And these lullabies were overheard and passed along and, generations later, that little song is all that is left to tell us of that child.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ CL 183.

¹⁰⁹ FP 281. See also 158.

¹¹⁰ FP 241.

Fugitive Pieces is like that song of comfort; yet, the process of singing the fragments as a lullaby not only remembers the dead, but also shapes the singers and the worlds in which they live.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ I must admit that none of this actually rebuts Kertzer's criticism: this still presents FP as a lesson, although it is not quite the lesson that Kertzer fears—a consoling lesson constructed on the backs of the bodies of the dead. Instead, it is a lesson in reading and imagining, a lesson in remembering through form. Still, it remains a lesson, and the ethical question still stands of whether it is right to use the victims of the Holocaust (or of any genocide) as the foundation of any type of learning. But beside this stands another question, also open and unanswered: is it not just as unethical for nothing to be learned from the atrocities of the past? The bodies remain, too, just like the questions.

nterlude III



odies digress.

They slip over the surface of the landscape, following the direction of their yearnings. They meander mostly along the contours of the earth, trajectories turned by the shapes of stone and sand and water, the cast of forest and tangle. Yet, sometimes, dreams and ghosts impel bodies to cut across the lines, or try. There is always more than any one story can tell.

Spectral (*adj.*): of a ghost, of an afterimage of a relationship between bodies; or, of the range of light diffracted through a prism. But even as bodies splinter on the impassable points, or slough off pieces on the scrabble they traverse, the bodies themselves are also prisms, for the storylines that go through them; bodies become points of convergence and divergence.

I learned from Graham Ward the fluidity of the relating body, and, from Stanley Hauerwas, the power of stories to shape that body. Marcella Althaus-Reid taught me that bodies in love make more than a good place for Christian theology to start, while Paul Ricoeur described the way persons narrate their own bodies. However, none of them seem that comfortable with the digressions of bodies (transgressions, yes, at least with respect to Althaus-Reid and Ward, but not digressions), with wanderings, the way the body's desire to be in two places at once is realised in the multiplicity of stories. (Ricoeur comes close, but we recall how he keeps separate history and fiction).

In *Fugitive Pieces*, the story of Jakob's body becomes many stories: first, with Jakob himself, and the links that he builds; then, with Ben's literary refraction of the poet's life; and, finally, with each reader and what they make of the story embodying Jakob's attempts to make life whole. The book becomes a whole spectrum of songs for the ghosts that haunt you. Yet there is more to be said concerning the different claims upon the body, those points where stories intersect. If readers pick up pieces and shape the body that they find, if books can help teach what to do with the body, then one cannot look just at the body, or the proximities of bodies to one another, or even to their travels, but must also attend to their intentions in getting from one place to another. For this, we walk with pilgrims, and trace their many routes.

There is always more than any one body can tell.

Chapter Eight

Catching the Body Against the Current:
The Disjunctions of Embodiment
and
The Man on a Donkey



F. M. Prescott's *The Man on a Donkey* tells the story of the religious changes in sixteenth-century England as the monarchy nationalised the church, and of the social upheavals and reactions engendered by the ecclesial break from Rome, specifically involving the suppression of the monasteries. The book focuses upon a group of characters based in the north of the country, and leads the reader to the Pilgrimage of Grace, an ill-fated attempt to restore the place of the traditional church by folk who were sure that the law that they knew would prevail once the true authorities saw reason. *The Man on a Donkey* is very much an historical novel, seeking to present readers with the world of the tale it narrates, a tale of people bound in their time. Prescott begins with an 'Author's Note', in which she declares:

The book is cast in the form of a chronicle. This form, which requires space to develop itself, has been used in an attempt to introduce the reader into a world, rather than at first to present him with a narrative. In that world he must for a while move like a stranger, as in real life picking up, from seemingly trifling episodes, understanding of those around him, and learning to know him without knowing what he learns. Only later, when the characters should by this means have become familiar, does the theme of the whole book emerge, as the different stories which it contains run together and are swallowed up in the tragic history of the Pilgrimage of Grace. And throughout, over against the world of sixteenth-century England, is set that other world, whose light is focused, as through a burning glass, in the half crazy mind of Malle, the serving-woman, and in the three cycles of her visions is brought to bear successively upon the stories of the chief characters of the Chronicle.¹

The Man on a Donkey sets about the art of reconstructing the past not so much through overwhelming one with the details of the way things were but rather through situating the characters in their time. Prescott chronicles the lives of five people who each have very different perspectives on the world, having very different stations; they are representative of different concerns, religious and social, and the deeds of the very powerful appear in relation to them, demonstrating the movements and connections of historical events through their effects. This makes the book a classically typical historical novel.²

¹ MoaD 6.

² See Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* 38-9, for a discussion of such a tangential treatment of the most important historical figures in the works of Walter Scott, and how this is deemed to enliven the representation of a time period.

However, the connecting character of Malle, serving-woman and apparent fool, adds another element entirely. At one level, Malle functions as a narrative device to strengthen the ties of those whose lives make up Prescott's chronicle of the Pilgrimage of Grace: she constitutes a figure who comes into contact with all the main characters. At a different level, though, she simultaneously subverts all of their historical motivations: Malle's visions of Christ being incarnate not in the past but in her present-day Yorkshire not only give a reason for all the main characters to seek her out, they also suggest to the reader a different view of history, a theological one. For all the situated nature of the characters, for all that the range of their choices are produced by the social position in which they are enmeshed, Malle hints that a change in perspective could give a change in direction as well.³ The novel's specifically Christian facet overlays the historical world with a theological one, not so that the one world negates or opposes the other, but so that they exist in a complicated relationship of tension, of push and pull.

In this, *The Man on a Donkey* well illustrates the disjunctions of human embodiment, the gaps between the awareness of the body as one's world and the awareness of the world through the senses of the body—gaps, too, between the different worlds in which people dwell simultaneously. These disjunctions already appear in the 'Author's Note', with a fracturing of history into 'the world of sixteenth-century England' and 'that other world'. One finds one's body split between worlds or, rather, inhabiting more than one place, depending on one's perspective, so that one can ignore simultaneous possibilities, or disavow them, but cannot reduce experience to a singular simplicity. The characters, in their embodiment, are all physically situated in history; as such, their knowledge and understanding are partial. Movements of cause and effect condition their actions; readers see that relationships and choices in any character's past affect (and sometimes effect) the way their possibilities are delimited. Yet, the characters still act out of their own peculiar beliefs and motivations, and out of what

³ As a character, Malle cuts rather a mysterious figure. Although she is the protagonist of the prologue and the epilogue, her appearance in the body of the narrative is sudden—one of the nuns of Marrick priory comes back from town with her, convinced that she is a mermaid (166-73)—and a full story of her origins is never given. In the 'Historical Note' at the end of the book, Malle does not appear at all (749-50). This serves to increase the prophetic tone of Malle's presence, as the reader is left guessing at the character's place in the historical record. If you judge by the structure of the book, in which the chronicle format is broken to introduce the major characters by bringing the reader up to date with the characters' lives up to the point that they enter the chronological narrative, Malle apparently is not to be considered one of the protagonists—at least, not a protagonist of the *history* that is being told: she is, instead, the protagonist of the counter-narrative.

they believe concerning other people. Time and time again, misreadings of a situation, caused by a person's specific character or even a mere glance in the wrong direction, cause them to act in ways that, little by little, determine the path on which history will carry them. The slippages between what characters believe and what is actually happening thus become productive, generating new action and perspective even out of misunderstanding, and hinting towards an excess, a spiralling chain of events. At the same time, all the characters—except Malle, perhaps, who might be *out* of place, but is still more than any other character comfortable in her own skin—are remarkably *displaced*. They yearn to be elsewhere, or for their times and their world to be otherwise than they are. Such yearning works against an apparent determinism of history. On the one hand, the body appears in its historical place, subject to the time of the novel's setting, the physical site for the working out of class, power and politics; on the other hand, the body in a spiritual sense comes to suggest that this historical place is a construction, and is capable of reconstruction, as shown when Malle sees God embodied in the world and offering the consolatory prospect of companionship with human beings. Through *The Man on a Donkey*, one may see how the tensions generated by disjunctions, while they cannot be resolved, remain creative tensions, offering possibilities for understanding the fluidity of the body.

In this chapter, I explore the disjunctions and displacements highlighted by *The Man on a Donkey*. After a brief discussion of the book as an historical novel, including examining the way H. F. M. Prescott formulated her historical work on pilgrimage, I turn to Paul Ricoeur. The way Prescott's novel deals with history can be linked to Ricoeur's discussion of the interpretation of the human understanding of time in the composition of narrative, particularly to the way human beings narrate or 'emplot' events in order to navigate the difference between large tracts of time (even eternity) and the time that we sense.⁴ The chapter ends with a consideration of that fluidity of the body, and the gaps in our understanding and awareness of the body, exploring the nature of absence as seen in how Malle, seeking the embodied Christ, finds but traces of his passing—yet those traces remain a concrete witness—and, with this, a reflection upon how the disjunction between the historical and the theological might be interpreted in such a work of creative imagination.

⁴ The issue is the subject of his long work TN, but for this chapter I will mainly be engaging with what he himself terms a 'schematic presentation' of the conclusions of that work's third volume, as presented in the essay 'Narrated Time' [NT].

Threading the Path of Time: *The Man on a Donkey* and Historical Narrative

The imagined world of *The Man on a Donkey* is a world in parentheses. As the book begins with an ‘Author’s Note’, it ends with an ‘Historical Note’, which informs the reader of the historical accuracy of Prescott’s tale. This note gives examples of the evidence behind the words and actions of the historical personages who appear in the novel, making sure to name the most famous and powerful of them, such as Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn.⁵ The note also points out the documentary foundations of the characterisations of three of the five protagonists: Lord Darcy and the uprising’s leader, lawyer Robin Aske, whose lives were well covered by contemporary chroniclers, and Christabel Cowper, the Prioress of Marrick, whose name Prescott took from a list of nuns and whose character the author deduced from the little evidence which she proclaims ‘suggestive of her personality’.⁶ The other two protagonists, Julian Savage, illegitimate daughter of a lord and a peasant, and Gib Dawe, a priest who becomes a Protestant, are both inventions of the author’s imagination.⁷

Even so, readers can see that with these five characters Prescott attempts to cover a range of types, the better to flesh out the world at the time of the social upheaval constituted by the English Reformation. Aske is necessary as the prime mover of the action of the novel’s plot. Darcy provides not only a narrative of what the change in church and state relations means for the nobility but also a means by which readers may gain a vantage point upon the English court and the political machinations of the years covered in the book. The prioress acts likewise for the monastic strand of ecclesiastic life, and projects the hierarchy of power in a religious community through her thoughts and deeds. Julian and Gib both stand among the lower classes and, although Gib presents the views of those who saw in Protestant theology a way to remake the world, both are characters whose lives primarily demonstrate the effect of social change on those powerless to shape it much for themselves. By weaving the tales of five very different characters together, Prescott allows a stereoscopic vision of the history: the

⁵ MoaD 749.

⁶ MoaD 749.

⁷ MoaD 749.

accounts from different vantage points overlap much like the way photographs of the same object taken from slightly different angles combine to create the appearance of depth because their shadows are slightly askew. Such a nuanced portrait works to convince readers that they are glimpsing the truest approximation of the past through the novelist's composition.⁸

The attempt to show the broadest possible view of a past social world exists very much as an historiographical move; to examine an era in history through the lives of a group of people constitutes part of the effort to get as much documentary evidence as possible in order to represent the past and make it available for an analysis of how that past fits hypothesised trends of cause-and-effect and meaning. The more evidence you examine, the greater the probability of the accuracy of your findings. Prescott herself did not confine the technique to her novel-writing. In an historical book on late mediaeval pilgrimages to Jerusalem, though Prescott focuses on the account of one pilgrim, Friar Felix Fabri, she begins with a chapter examining a group of representative

⁸ This literary technique is similar to Anne Michaels's poetics in which the partial suggests the whole (see [29] above). Although Michaels is referring particularly to poetry, one might also describe Prescott's novel as 'a loose net, a sieve, both unviable and durable as a physical object: a web of molecules that gives the illusion of wholeness' (CL 161). While it is impossible for a writer to capture fully and completely the past in which a novel is set for the work's contemporary readership, a writer can construct a textual world with enough historical elements within it that the reader's imagination can do the rest.

Prescott's weaving of different perspectives also serves to demonstrate the relational nature of historical narrative. When Lukács summarises the narrative aim of a novel which aims at realism as 'the portrayal of a total context of social life', he is pointing out that the story being told must be situated in terms of a believable relationship of all the parts, not just characters with other characters but also characters with the world around them (Lukács, 242). Admittedly, Lukács maintains that this novelistic attempt to depict society as a whole is not a characteristic peculiar to historical novels but to any truly realistic novel, but one could argue that it is particularly important for an historical novel because of the gulf between the experience of the reader and the world of the past. In any case, the fact that *MoaD* has such an array of protagonists allows the book more thoroughly to compose an overview of the social life at the time of Henry VIII.

Interestingly, both Lukács and Michaels criticise writing that succumbs to the temptation to overdo this. Lukács disparages any tendency towards what he calls 'archeologism' in historical novels—the idea that paying slavish attention to technical, material detail of life in the past will generate a good novel about that past—declaring that this just serves to make the world of the novel 'strange and unfamiliar' so that a reader cannot actually connect with its imagined world very well (Lukács, 198). Michaels refers to what can happen if the multiplication of perceptions concerning an imagined world or moment goes too far as 'a writer's false hope that mere plenitude of detail will swell into realism' (CL, 179). *MoaD* does not fall into this trap; the details of artefacts seem accurate but not intrusive, as the focus remains on the perspective of the characters, even if in third-person voice from an omniscient narrator. The realism does not come from a heap of accumulated factual details, but rather from the position of each character's gaze: their partial seeing, hearing, and knowing situates them in time and place, so that their limits generate the sense that they are more human, more embodied. (See, again, Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', *FST*, for the discussion of partiality, position and epistemology; in a way, a novel like *MoaD* demonstrates the point that Haraway is making in showing that a plurality of embodied, limited and situated voices, speaking from embodied, limited and situated experiences, portrays best the fullness of a world.)

types of pilgrims. Prescott declares that ‘it will be well to try to set [the friar] against the background of his time, and among some of the vast company of pilgrims who made that same journey during the fifteenth century and left a record of their experiences’.⁹ In doing so, she does not limit the people she profiles to being exactly contemporary to Felix Fabri—who made the journey twice, first in 1480 and again in 1483—for what matters more is that the historical record of their pilgrimage exists to be consulted, so that the group ranges from Margery Kempe in 1413 to Arnold von Harff, a noble, in the 1490s. They make up a diverse group of devout laypeople, members of the nobility, a priest, a bishop, a collection of friars, and a canon who had long served as ‘secretary at the Milanese Embassy in Rome’.¹⁰ This variety, while necessarily restricted to people having the means to leave behind their own documentation of their travel, nevertheless serves to broaden the reader’s understanding of what the pilgrim’s journey could have been like; thus, the historian in contextualising the narrative of her subject increases the possibility that readers might identify with that subject by striving to generate a fuller, deeper comprehension of people in the past. Prescott tells readers that they will turn to the testimony of these other fifteenth-century pilgrims ‘from time to time for some anecdote or comment which adds to our picture of the pilgrims’ world’.¹¹ Details given from the perspectives of different pilgrims provide support for the main narrative which Prescott is examining.

As a history, *Jerusalem Journey* remains primarily an account of a narrative; there is more presentation than analysis, more of the telling of the tale of the journey. Prescott basically retells Brother Felix’s *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae*, with commentary on the events and additions concerning places and types of experiences from other pilgrims’ records; however, she does not do this by presenting a translated edition of the Latin text, but by re-narrating the journey.¹² This aspect of narration

⁹ JJ 14.

¹⁰ JJ 39.

¹¹ JJ 18.

¹² In this, JJ can be seen as a textbook illustration of Ricoeur’s idea of the fictionality of history, including his work on the place of the imagination both in historiography and in the reading of history. See TN, volume 1, part 2, and volume 3, particularly chapter eight, ‘The Interweaving of History and Fiction’ (180-92). Prescott’s historical work certainly exemplifies what Ricoeur terms ‘narrative history’, the past understood as a story of what happened (TN, 1, 91). Now, understandably, Ricoeur strives primarily to show the narrative character of even the least narrative-like forms of history (see v. 1, 91 and 230), but in pointing out the importance of plot, characterisation and event for our understanding of the connection of history and the past, he demonstrates the place of a narrative

stands alongside the technique of a plurality of perspectives in connecting *Jerusalem Journey* to *The Man on a Donkey*. By the stories that they tell, both books, together with their readers, seek to construct a believable world which the imagination can inhabit. Yet, the two books go about their stated tasks very differently. Beyond their author identifying one book as a history and the other as a novel, the books approach the issue of particularity and universality from opposite directions. *Jerusalem Journey* uses the story of Brother Felix's pilgrimage, supplemented where needed by the stories of other pilgrims throughout the century, to present what pilgrimage would have been like generally; *The Man on a Donkey*, though the years it chronicles constitute lifetimes for its characters, brings its protagonists together, to a point in time, to present what consequences the circumstances around a particular event—the Pilgrimage of Grace—might have had for specific people contemporary to and involved in that event.¹³

To work as a novel, *The Man on a Donkey* must invite readers to enter its world to a much greater extent than *Jerusalem Journey* requires. Besides characterisation, one of the techniques which the historical novel utilises is what Georg Lukács calls 'necessary anachronism', referring to the need to bridge the gap between the incomprehensibilities of the past and the mentality of one's reader.¹⁴ The great marker

such as JJ historiographically, as one end of a range of historiographical types, where the other end would be the purest analysis of statistical data possible. When Ricoeur discusses the ways that history and fiction function to aid one another, he writes of history as the attempt to move from the trace of the past to being able to see a world that is no longer, to try to see what you would see if you could get to the past's foreign country. Readers use their imagination for this type of seeing in a similar way that readers approach a work of fiction and imagine its world that is not immediately before them except in the text, so that 'One and the same work can thus be a great work of history and a fine novel. What is surprising is that this interlacing of fiction and history in no way undercuts the project of standing-for [*sic*] belonging to history, but instead helps to realize it' (TN, 3, 186). Prescott's voice, the voice of the historian telling the stories of the pilgrims, uses arts of storytelling to present the pilgrims' world to people at a great remove from it.

¹³ In relation to the difference between the two books, one may also note Lukács's analysis of the way the main characters of historical novels tend to be peripherally connected to the prime actors in history—the famous people—in order to demonstrate the relationship between the novel's main characters and a socio-historical crisis. As Lukács writes, 'The historical crises are direct components of the individual destinies of the main characters and accordingly form an integral part of the action itself. In this way the individual and the social-historical are inseparably connected in regard to both characterization and action' (200-1). The five chronicled characters of MoaD are all directly affected by the Reformation of the Church in England: Aske and Darcy are executed for their parts in the Pilgrimage of Grace; the prioress is turned out of the priory as it is placed in the hands of the nobility; Julian loses every chance of stability, comfort and love that she perceives; and Dawe, though an adherent of the New Learning, finds that his failure to negotiate Reformation politics, combined with overweening pride and lack of compassion, just feeds his anger, self-hatred, and despair. In JJ, Prescott strives to bring an era alive, and uses Brother Felix's fascinating account to illustrate and enliven.

¹⁴ Lukács 195.

of such anachronism lies in the language used in the novel, for in order to be understandable to present-day readers, the novelist composes the story in present-day language, with only a sprinkling of archaic words to flavour the text and remind the readers that they are concerned with the past.¹⁵ In so doing, of course, *The Man on a Donkey* creates a linguistic world that never existed apart from the novel and the imaginations of its readers. This appears even more forcefully in the form that Prescott chose to give to the work, that of a chronicle. Annals and chronicles have a long historical pedigree in documenting events—one might think of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for instance—but Prescott gives the genre a modern twist. Few historical chronicles would have recorded the stories of characters like Julian and Gib, certainly not in the detail given in *The Man on a Donkey*. Rather than reaching for full verisimilitude, the chronicle technique creates an illusion of a document contemporaneous with the events it portrays, and thus helps to construct a world simultaneously unlike that of the reader and that of the actual past. The anachronistic combination of the chronicle genre and present-day readers' interest in the lives of all types and classes of people mark out a certain chronological slippage, a split between duties of faithfulness to the past and meeting the artistic needs of the present.¹⁶

This slippage constructs an imagined space in which author and reader can explore the meanings of the narrated events and bodies. The story told is no longer only history, but history through the craft of the novelist, whose constructed world is set alongside the dual worlds that she herself perceives (and addresses): the socio-political realm, on the one hand, and the divine on the other. There is no simple bifurcation of

¹⁵ John Henry Raleigh, in 'The Historical Novel as Work of Art and Tragedy: H. M. F. [sic.] Prescott's *The Man on a Donkey*' 13, notes that archaisms are restricted to the dialogue in the book, being used either for era-appropriate epithets and curses or for dialect words that mark a character's class or home region. While this is mostly true, there is another place that archaisms emerge—in theological descriptions connected with Malle's visions. (For examples, see MoaD 387 and 741.)

¹⁶ The chronicle technique does move beyond this 'necessary anachronism' in the literary artistry that it provides for the story, as pointed out in Raleigh, 'Historical Novel', 3-11. Using the form of a chronicle allows Prescott to telescope time, playing with the chronology so that during the climactic events time is stretched as more detail is given. The form lets Prescott have characters narrate events that have occurred outside the chronological entries or receive the narration of events which they do not witness. Prescott also uses the chronicle genre to set up a very sophisticated matrix of symbols, events and places, so that the reader continually is encouraged to compare what is happening 'here' with what happened 'there', as well as generating a seasonal cycle of events that will feed into the theological time of the novel. It should also be noted, however, that even though the novel is in the form of a chronicle, it does not cease to be a narrative (as Raleigh seems to suggest, 'Historical Novel', 3) but rather rearranges the expectations of the narrative along episodic lines, all in conjuring up the world of the sixteenth century in a way that can be told to the twentieth (and later).

worlds, however—something which can be seen in the characters themselves, for the chief characters all live simultaneously, not only in the two worlds singled out by Prescott in her opening ‘Author’s Note’, but also in the fictive world created by the writing of the novel. Following upon this many-faceted nature of creation, the story and the characterisation continually draw attention to forces which pull in multiple directions.

One may see this in sharp relief at any of the times that the chief characters come in direct contact with Malle and her visions. It is not that those chief characters cannot perceive the existence of spiritual things—that they are totally blind to what Malle shows to the world—but that what they understand of spiritual matters is intertwined with their political and social natures. For instance, when Darcy goes to ask Malle what she has seen, hoping to get a sign for political action against the regime’s new ways, she presents him only with the same sentence that she says to all the others: ‘There was a great wind of light blowing, and sore pain’.¹⁷ Eventually, waiting for something more on which to pin his hopes, Darcy says, ‘He would not resist His enemies. That I know. But for us it is different. Shall we stand by and see—and not—’.¹⁸ Darcy is certainly not unaware of a conflict between approaches here, of different ways to see history, but goes on to continue in the path of the political choices that he has already made.

The tensions presented in *The Man on a Donkey* between different approaches to seeing the world could be understood as conflicts in loyalty. When there are multiple possibilities for seeking meaning, to which do you ascribe the most weight, and what of the burden of the others whose existence and possibilities never actually go away? The book depicts the way different claims upon a person—and upon a person’s body—stand almost as coexisting, but alternate, worlds because of variations in the direction of the eyes towards the one world. The reader sees the bodies of the characters claimed both by a socio-political web and by a religious nexus. The literary artistry of the book in making the characters come alive—in causing readers to care about what happens to them—reveals yet another claim, that of the personal. The characters live in the imagination in as much as readers see them as having personal claims over what happens to their bodies; that is, the depth of the characterisation shows when the

¹⁷ MoaD 408.

¹⁸ MoaD 409.

historical conflict between the socio-political realm and the religious is mediated by the realisation that the characters themselves would be the ones with the most intimate connection to their bodies, the ones who feel pleasure and pain, the ones whose bodies are irreducible—certainly not reduced only to the claims that others have upon them. The novelist articulates the awareness of the splits and slippages surrounding claims upon the body, using literary technique to point them up. Characters may be aware, from time to time, of contradictions between personal, social, and religious ‘ownership’ of the body, but it is the author who plots this cohesively. The nature of this book as an historical novel, then, not only presents a world of the past to the reader, but also arranges that past and the imagination of that past to suggest a certain reading, one that leads to questions about how different approaches might connect to one another.

A Travel Guide: Walking along the road with a few words from Ricoeur

In ‘Narrated Time’, an essay following his magisterial work, *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur wonders how narrative’s rearranging of events might change the human experience of time. Near the beginning, he declares that he wishes to discuss ‘refiguration’, which he defines as ‘the power of revelation and transformation achieved by narrative configurations when they are “applied” to actual acting and suffering’.¹⁹ Admittedly, this covers an immense range of possibilities; even though Ricoeur himself states that he will focus on the aspect of time in human understanding, this cannot bracket out the fact that such ‘revelation and transformation’ to which he refers alludes to a reconstruction of nothing less than the way human beings encounter the world around them, as well as one another, and the power that narratives have to affect the situations in which people live. Yet, although this involves some very large claims, I want to concentrate on the foundation from which Ricoeur unfolds his argument—that human beings experience time in an aporetic manner, divided between lived moments and that ‘immensity of time’ whose scale approaches eternity—as instructive for examining the embodied disjunctions which *The Man on a Donkey* presents.²⁰ What Ricoeur writes concerning the meeting of historical and fictional time provides a

¹⁹ NT 339.

²⁰ NT 343.

template for discussing the creative space created by the divided sense of the body which Prescott chronicles.

Ricoeur portrays historical time and fictional time as two different but related ways of bridging the gap between lived time and cosmic time. He sketches historical time as having three elements which he calls ‘connectors’.²¹ The first of these is ‘calendar time’, the activity of fixing time by means of naming seasons and years, and ascribing events upon this ordered chronological range by giving them dates.²² This process, Ricoeur argues, ‘integrates the community and its customs into the cosmic order’.²³ In other words, calendar time brings the moments of lived experience into relation with the grand expanses of what has happened in the past and what is surmised to happen in the future; the measured pattern of chronology carves time into manageable sections for human reference, giving the ability to situate events. The second connector to which Ricoeur points is ‘the sequence of generations’.²⁴ He calls attention to the way generations biologically mark time in terms of one’s ancestry and progeny; he also notes that it is the overlap of generations that allows the chain of family memories to continue and to grow. This ordering of biological existence expands the moments of one person’s life into the past and towards the future. Finally, Ricoeur cites as the third bridging element ‘history’s recourse to monuments and documents’.²⁵ For him, such records of the past act as traces, as still-existing remnants of what once was but is no longer; the artefacts maintain physical presence in the world, but in so doing witness to people or deeds gone by, representing that which is absent. The world of the past becomes an inference gained from these three bridging elements, as do hopes for a future.²⁶

Fictional time functions in a similar way in bridging lived moments to the expanses of cosmic chronology. A novel with its plot and characters generates a fictive world with its own calendar, sequence of generations, and traces of the past to be

²¹ NT 343.

²² NT 343.

²³ NT 344.

²⁴ NT 344.

²⁵ NT 344.

²⁶ NT 345-6.

narrated; even if a writer imagines such things differently, the categories remain. Ricoeur proposes that historical and fictional time differ at the level of intent, writing that

We are aware that the ambition of the historian is that his constructions be also more or less approximate reconstructions of events which have actually happened in the past; whereas the novelist, even if...he projects something like a world of the text, leaves indeterminate the relation between his imaginary world and the actual world where the activity of the reader is situated.²⁷

Historians attempt to represent the past in some way, including by the interpretation of what really happened.²⁸ Although this involves imaginary reconstructions, it is different from the composition of fiction in that fiction is not bound to fix the time that it seeks to imagine. Still, Ricoeur disputes the idea that this means that only historians aim to depict something that is real, arguing that if fiction and history were not closely alike in so many ways, they would generate no conflict with one another.²⁹ To analyse how historical time relates to fictional time with more nuance, he utilises the connectors which he has already outlined for historical time. Ricoeur posits that ‘the response of fiction’ to the aporetic nature of time is ‘to invent imaginative variations with respect to the cosmic reinscription effected by history’.³⁰ Novels create their ‘imaginative variations’ by being free from the constraints that govern those connectors in history. The key seems to be that events in fictive worlds occur unmoored from the chronological systems by which human beings make sense of cosmic time. Not that plots do not unfold over time, but that the events of a story happen over and over again within that story, every time that it is read—though, with each reading, readers are also free to imagine the events differently, to notice things for the first time. This means that where, for history, time passes to a consistently measured beat, for fiction, time is bound by the beginnings and ends of stories, and what they suggest might exist beyond

²⁷ NT 339-40.

²⁸ In a discussion of methods for understanding the past-ness of the past in history, Ricoeur moves through the notion that history involves ‘re-enactment’ which tries to bring the past to the same level as the present and then the idea that the nature of the past lives in its radical (unbridgeable?) ‘otherness’, finally to suggest that the best way of thinking about the past is analogically—‘To say *what* things were *as*, is to *see* them *as*’. (NT, 347-8). The search for what really happened then becomes an exercise of imagined relation.

²⁹ NT 349.

³⁰ NT 351.

those borders, but inside those borders time plays to the whim of the imagination somewhat like music at the baton of a conductor. Ricoeur notes that ‘The exploration of the possible can thus give free rein to imaginative variations which have the experiential value of eternity’.³¹ Fiction offers endless variation because the fictive worlds and their characters, freed from inscription in calendar time, live in a way such that the dead remain with the living despite the relentless sequence of generations, and the trace is an outline of that which is absent but may never have been there.

According to Ricoeur, the power of fiction to take part in the refiguration of time lies precisely in the incongruity between fictional time and historical time. He declares:

Thus it is in *reading* that the world of the text and the fictive experience of time which emerges from it intersect with the actual world of the reader, the world of my actual acting and suffering. The meaning of the work in the full sense of the word, its significance, if you will, is complete only in its more or less conflictual encounter between the world of the text and the world of the reader.³²

The imaginative variations on those elements which bridge lived time and cosmic time—the fictional orderings rather than the historical ones—gain significance as the reader compares what could have been with what she or he actually understands to have happened. This significance underlines both revelation and transformation in that the truth about the world which thereby is revealed changes the reader.³³

This works as a way to approach the point where a reader’s specifically historical narrative encounters a separate fiction. However, what then do you do with a novel like *A Man on a Donkey*, with historical fiction? Here we have a narrative striving to be constrained by calendar time, even if elements (including whole persons) did not exist in history’s version of that calendar, a narrative that mixes the two approaches which Ricoeur labels ‘disymmetrical’.³⁴ At first glance this would suggest that, perhaps, Ricoeur’s formulation just does not work for an historical novel; there is too much mingling of genre going on, too much confusion of possibility and what really happened for one to follow a theory which seems to separate history and fiction over the question of claims concerning the truth. Another way to understand what it could mean for the

³¹ NT 351-2.

³² NT 350.

³³ NT 350-1.

³⁴ NT 346.

novel would be to infer that Ricoeur's construction of different modes or understandings of time emphasises the two worlds to which Prescott draws attention; in the world of Malle, the fictional coincides with the theological as the author weaves meaning into the historical events, and the significance of the novel may only be seen in the conflict between the two worlds. This interpretation works to a point. The tension between the political realm of sixteenth-century England and the eternal realm of the divine does indeed drive the novel. But the separation between the two realms, as already noted, is not total; the historical and the theological, representing in this case Prescott as historian and Prescott as creative writer, intermingle more than they intersect.

Yet, to think that this apparent mismatch between Ricoeur's theorising and Prescott's writing causes one to disprove the other would be an oversimplification of both. Ricoeur ends 'Narrated Time' with a discussion of the ways that history is like fiction and vice versa. Of history, he remarks that 'The connectors that reinscribe mortal time upon cosmic time are all institutions, inventions that witness to the ingenuity of the productive imagination'.³⁵ He also talks about fiction's place in helping people in the present imagine the depths of the horrible, such as the Holocaust, for imagination which utilises a type of fictive account of the world enfleshes the statistics of the dead.³⁶ Of fiction, Ricoeur observes that a story told is invariably related 'as if it were past'.³⁷ A fictive account is set up alongside what is known of the historical past, functioning as an alternative which prompts new understandings of relationships and meanings. Ricoeur declares that

The interpretation which I propose here of the quasi-historical character of fiction cross-checks with what I propose concerning the quasi-fictional character of the historical past. It is because of its quasi-historical character that fiction can exercise its liberating function with respect to possible hidden elements in the actual past. What 'could have taken place'—the object of poetry as opposed to history according to Aristotle—fuses the potentialities of the 'real' past and the 'irreal' possibilities of pure fiction.³⁸

³⁵ NT 352.

³⁶ NT 353.

³⁷ NT 353. Interestingly, Ricoeur goes on to argue that a fictional account does tell of something that happened—something that took place for the 'narrative voice' or 'implied author', that is.

³⁸ NT 354.

I take this to mean that fiction and history, by virtue of their resemblance to one another, collaborate in the work of revelation and transformation. They both reveal part of the truth of the world, and in that truth offer a reader the chance to follow along in the path of what has been perceived—a chance, to reconstruct (or reconfigure, as Ricoeur would probably say) the narratives by which human beings mark actions and make decisions about possible actions. By the combination of the two narratives of time, Ricoeur declares that people fashion a ‘human time’ that reconciles experienced moments with the cosmic expanse of era after era, a time in which one can live with narrated meaning.³⁹

Under this scheme, *The Man on a Donkey* becomes a meditation on how people work to reconcile the two kinds of time using different kinds of narratives telling about time, and on how human embodiment simultaneously is suspended in those narratives in ways congruent to the narratives. What the novel does and what Ricoeur postulates do not correspond in a simple, one-to-one analogy, however. The book works at various levels, and each of those levels reflects what Ricoeur observes about time’s aporias in a different way. Within the world of the text, the characters find themselves negotiating among the claims that different narratives stake on them and their bodies; the two worlds of the political and the divine align with the gap between lived moments and the cosmic/ eternal. At the level of engaging with the text of the novel, author and readers tread a path between the historical and the fictional. For this, on the one hand, the text draws upon what is inscribed in calendar time and what may be discovered about the past from the documentary traces which have been left behind; on the other hand, the text, as constructed and imagined, embodies in what has been invented the pursuit of ‘what could have been’, an area which is imbued with values supplied by the choices made by the author. What is essential to realise is that, as with Ricoeur’s formulation of the matter, there are actually two very different, though connected, gaps at play here: the gap in how people experience time, and the gap between the narrative methods by which people attempt to bridge the gap in what they experience. As an author, it would seem that Prescott wants to underscore the gap in experience through the story which she is telling, utilising the tension between the historical and the fictional to provide the

³⁹ NT 354.

energy that drives the story.⁴⁰ The significance of what Ricoeur provides is that his scheme gives a structure by which one can discuss Prescott's novel. The rest of this chapter will follow that structure, looking first at the world of the text and what the characters demonstrate about the various ways that the human body is oriented simultaneously, then turning to the craft of the writer in seeking a theological and liturgical response to the formal gap between history and fiction, a response revealed in a discussion of the trace of the absent body.

Fractured Person, Fractured Body

At any one moment, a person is pulled in many directions—where they have been and where they are going; where they have imagined they have been, where they think they are going, where they want to go; what they tell others of these things, what is documented or traced in words and actions. If you have the chance to look closely at any person, it is possible to notice such divisions. Some are created by circumstance, some by self-delusions, and some by dreams and desires which can only approximately match with what is possible for individuals. Of course, one can only surmise how this works for any one person (even for oneself); motivation is hidden from view, and memories and imaginations are not always trustworthy. Fiction conjures up the possibilities, however, opening windows upon what is concealed. *The Man on a Donkey* is no exception to this. As mentioned earlier, the characters show evidence of divided loyalties as they negotiate different understandings of the world in which they live, a world itself depicted in the novel as divided. Not only are the characters pulled in different because of the differing claims upon them, but they do not see the totality of

⁴⁰ One might notice that this places the theological with the fictional in terms of function. This is not to say that theological values are fictional, but that as they are brought into this text, their presence relies upon the author's creative choices in fashioning this particular fictive world. The author draws out theological meaning by telling this story in the way she does. In fact, the novel is inherently christological, going beyond the obvious title reference, Malle's visions of Jesus, and the allusions to the gospel narrative in plot and characterisation, to the novel's reflections upon the gaps between different modes of time. Christology, as the study of the identity and work of Jesus of Nazareth, precisely concerns itself with explaining what Christian faith acknowledges concerning one whose embodiment bridges the gap between different ways of understanding the world. Look, for instance, at the Chalcedonian Creed with its insistence on the person of Christ as being both divine and human, the two natures undivided but not mingled or confused. Christological reflection upon the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith also constitutes an investigation into the paradox of differing but intersecting narratives. By contemplating the possibilities for reconciling the various strands which pull at a body, *The Man on a Donkey* enacts a christological meditation.

what is happening. The novel points out the tragedy of the characters' partial vision, depicting this not only in what is said but at the level of the body, too.

Take, for example, the characterisation of Robin Aske, tragic hero, leader of the Pilgrimage of Grace, the consequences of which destroy him. At first glance, Aske is the most sympathetic of the five chief characters of Prescott's chronicle. He stays true to his ideals, never giving up on the principle of law. To those who look for such things, he appears to be the Christ figure of the tale, with his gruesome execution corresponding to the crucifixion of Jesus.⁴¹ But this is not the full story; Prescott configures Aske in a much more complex manner. First of all, she never allows the reader to forget that Aske lost an eye in a childhood accident.⁴² His one-eyed nature becomes a cipher for his failure to see the full dimension of things that are happening around him. His partial blindness goes beyond the physiological wound to a wilful narrowing of his vision, as may be seen by looking at his encounters with other characters. He does not see his effect on Julian, who has fallen in love with him and whose last hope is pinned on the idea that she might be given in marriage to him, partly because he physically does not see her face and thus cannot see the depth of her anguish.⁴³ Indeed, Aske never realises how much her dreams of him have shaped the course of her life; he is so busy worrying about the state of justice in England that he never really sees Julian as a person, and even his attempts at kindness (such as pledging friendship by planting apple seeds together without noticing that the girl was looking for far more) miss the mark.⁴⁴

Aske's personal pain resounds out of the divisions of claims in which his body is enmeshed, resulting finally in the extreme physical pain of his execution. Under the law, as a lawyer and a subject of the king, he and his body is pledged in service to the state. In a sense, his death stands as a transaction in which the king claims the body that

⁴¹ Henry VIII, hearing an appeal that Aske not be drawn and quartered, decided that a more fitting punishment would be for the rebel to be hanged in chains from the tower of the Keep at York until he died a slow death, presumably of exposure and thirst (MoaD 726-8). Aske's execution coincides with the climax of Malle's series of visions which recapitulate the life of Christ (MoaD 737-8).

⁴² Beginning at MoaD 111-3.

⁴³ MoaD 437.

⁴⁴ MoaD 437. A similar blindness is marked in his meeting with Malle, when he seeks a sign of God's approval of his purpose, sign of Christ riding in victory, but she speaks the one sentence pointing to the darkness of the suffering of God (428-31).

is owed to him, the body that failed to render due service to the crown.⁴⁵ Yet, as a devout Catholic, Aske deems his body as also belonging to his God. He determines his course of action with these claims upon his body in mind. But by revealing his multivalent blindness the novel presents the human tragedy of Aske's story—his attempts to act justly have unintended consequences on people all around him—and yet this also fleshes out the humanity of his character. The claims of crown and religion upon his body cannot undo the fact that when Robin Aske dies, it is Robin Aske who suffers, Robin Aske whose world is unmade.

In such characters as Aske, *The Man on a Donkey* emphasises that human beings are not free in our embodiment, but rather we are enmeshed in a series of intersecting and coinciding matrices of time and narrative. A paradox thus appears when one considers the body: it is both one and many. The body is many in that the claims upon a person's body all claim a different aspect of a person, a different way of thinking about the body. But the one physical body remains at the junction of all of these claims, even if the various claims pull it towards fragmentation, even if the body itself appears differently under shifting gazes. Perception of the body makes it malleable, as might be said by anyone who observes that bodies are socially constructed.⁴⁶

A Trace in Liturgical Time

In his article about *The Man on a Donkey*, John Henry Raleigh argues that the defining ethos of the novel is tragedy. Certainly all the chief characters end tragically, dead or in some other way dispossessed. Raleigh does not confine this sense to only one aspect of the novel, writing that the book 'is not only an historical tragedy but a religious tragedy as well'.⁴⁷ For proof he directs readers to how Prescott depicts Aske's end, claiming that such a climax reveals utter hopelessness, and that 'the Christ evoked

⁴⁵ See Foucault 28ff. for a discussion of the social and political ramifications of penal torture and execution, in which, once tortured, 'the body has produced and reproduced the truth of the crime' and 'by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted' (47, 48). The execution of Aske, then, is a manifestation of royal power reinstating its personal hold over the bodies of its subjects. In Prescott's telling, however, the 'reproduction of the truth of the crime' is a reproduction of more than one truth; the crown inadvertently reproduces the passion of the Son of God in this other son of God, subverting state power by its own actions.

⁴⁶ See the work of Judith Butler, for instance. On the malleability of the body, see the discussion of Graham Ward in Chapter One, above.

⁴⁷ Raleigh 165.

in the novel is not the Christ of Easter Sunday but the Christ of Good Friday'.⁴⁸ To Raleigh, the work presents a belief that those virtues which Christians are called to enact as disciples remain only in the past; the story reveals Christian life and the possibility of redemption solely in the negative sense of the way the characters fail to see the hope that is offered to them. The only ones who can sense the presence of Christ are madwomen, like Malle, and children.⁴⁹ The novel, in this view, tells the story of the failure of the divine world to make any lasting impact on the human world of politics and society and its history beyond the glorification of suffering.

The Man on a Donkey is, indeed, a theological novel.⁵⁰ However, Raleigh's take on the type of theology that the book presents is not the only possible interpretation. For one thing, the novel seems to follow a much more Johannine theology, so that the day of glory contains both crucifixion and resurrection, which leads to the time of the Spirit offering the community of the church. For another, Raleigh ignores passages which mention resurrection and hope, even though the chief characters miss these moments, such as when Gib Dawe, filled with the anguish over his own perceived worthlessness, fails to see the light that shines in the windows of the church even as he is fleeing, a light which the narrator interprets as indicative of the feast of Christ in joy with all his children.⁵¹ Beyond debating interpretations, though, one may note that the book adopts a theological form in the way Prescott has fashioned its structure to make Malle's story a unifying thread among the tale of years. In the opening note, Prescott writes of there being three cycles of Malle's visions. Roughly speaking, the first cycle is constituted by Malle's visions of episodes in the life of Jesus up to the point of his entry into Jerusalem, as reported by others who heard her speak of them. The end of this cycle is marked off by a description of the appearance at the priory of a stranger whom Malle follows out into the countryside before he disappears.⁵² The second cycle of visions is

⁴⁸ Raleigh 166.

⁴⁹ Raleigh 167-8.

⁵⁰ This point may be demonstrated in part by looking at the only other extended treatment of the novel which I know other than Raleigh's essay, and that is in a work of theology, Rowan Williams's *Christ on Trial*. Williams basically uses episodes of the novel as illustrations of the unexpected ways that God's presence is made known, and how that presence refuses to allow easy answers (13-5, 34-5, 79-81, 126).

⁵¹ MoaD 742.

⁵² MoaD 384-7.

of the ‘great wind of light blowing, and sore pain’.⁵³ Each of these is recounted in terms of an encounter between Malle and one of the chief characters. The third cycle comes at the end; Malle receives visions related to the crucifixion, and wishes to tell the five main characters, each in turn, a specific message based on a vision; in every case, she cannot reach the person to whom she hopes to impart her words. Prescott structures the three cycles in two different ways: first, in each cycle, visions follow the order that the five main characters have come into the story and, later, will leave it. The visions also follow a liturgical calendar, from Christmas through Holy Week to Pentecost.

With such an ordering of visions along liturgical lines, Prescott achieves an account of time which is alternative to the historical calendar by which she marks out the entries in the chronicle. Not only does the book thus create the semblance of a document for its ‘necessary anachronism’, as mentioned above, it also supplies a ready-made subversive reading to the historical time which that document narrates. Simultaneously, this challenges interpretations which would simply read Aske as a ‘Christ figure’, for even though he embodies some elements of the story of Jesus, particularly in his death, he is clearly not the Christ whom Malle sees in her visions. Just as the five chief characters find themselves pulled by conflicting narratives and claims upon their embodiment, readers also find themselves negotiating rival interpretations, forced either to allow their coexistence or to choose which interpretation should bear the most weight. Is the novel an historical tragedy, a cautionary tale against trusting in the power of justice? Is the novel more of a theological meditation which suggests that human beings are not locked into the ineluctable grind of corruption and desolation? Can it be both?

Different readings of the novel reflect different perspectives on embodiment within the world, perspectives which co-exist tensely throughout the book. But although these viewpoints appear to lead to opposition to one another, the situation remains much more complicated, as may be noted by examining the primary scene in which the boundary between the two ‘worlds’ melts away, when Malle follows the stranger who visits Marrick priory. Here the reader sees one of Malle’s visions instead of hearing about it, and so does everyone at the priory: the stranger joins the workers in the kitchen for ale, and as he talks, everyone listens; the nuns notice the man, giving mixed reviews; and Wat, Gib Dawe’s mute and developmentally-challenged son, sees the special nature

⁵³ MoaD 396, 408, 416, 430, and 448.

in him, joining Malle in following as the stranger goes.⁵⁴ The political perspective in *The Man on a Donkey* manifests itself most clearly in the observations of the Prioress, who finds herself in turns fascinated and repelled by the man's presence as she watches from the distance of her window: the stranger, for all his earthy appearance, carries with him an unquantifiable dignity which is dangerous to accepted structures of authority.⁵⁵ Prescott lets her readers in on the secret shortly thereafter, if they have not already discerned it, for the stranger is a Man-with-a-capital-M, 'Him' who is known and marked for who he is only by the half-crazy, the wounded and the animals—and those readers, though after the fact and from a vantage point outside of the world of the novel.⁵⁶ In contrast to the reaction from historical, institutional time's thread in the story, Malle and Wat assert no claims upon this Christ. The closest they get to him is when he turns around at the gate and looks at them, stilling them in their tracks.⁵⁷ Most of the time they are watching his back as he is walking away, until he disappears among the trees of a wood. While the description of encounters with the stranger inside the priory complex points to people trying to fit him into their conceptions of the world, the description of the episode outside the priory focuses on the way this Christ, simply by his presence, effects transformation in the world.⁵⁸ The narrator declares:

For God, that was too great to be holden even of everywhere and forever, had bound Himself into the narrow room of here and now. He that was in all things had, for pity, prisoned Himself in flesh and in

⁵⁴ MoaD 384-6.

⁵⁵ The Prioress first judges the man 'an ugly vagabond knave' before being unsettled by the fact that, when the man walks 'under the lintel of the gate-house...something in the way he carried himself made it seem, though it was amply high, too low and mean for him to pass beneath' (MoaD 385). Her final opinion rests in hostility, as she concludes that 'this is one of those whose humour it is to grudge at rich men, and would pull down all to be as wretched as they' (MoaD 385-6).

⁵⁶ Ducks and sheep joined in procession with Malle and Wat as they followed the Christ-stranger as far as the gate in the wall which marked the edge of priory lands (MoaD 386). One also should note that it is only after the stranger leaves the priory complex that Prescott shifts references to him from 'man' to 'Man'.

⁵⁷ MoaD 386.

⁵⁸ As Christ passes under the branches of the trees, the text proclaims that 'the little twigs seemed to clap themselves together for joy' (MoaD 386). Also, though the season is early spring, to Malle, after the encounter, 'the ears of corn were full,...loaded with goodness' (387). The first of these is probably a reference to Isaiah 55:12, which is very interestingly contextually, for Isaiah 55 is a call to come and share in a world made new, a time when God declares that God's word 'shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it' (Is. 55:11); Prescott's invocation of this emphasises a perspective of faith in which the story of embodied life is not limited to tragedy.

simple bread. He that thought winds, waters and stars, had made of Himself a dying man.⁵⁹

The incarnation is depicted as a binding and emptying of God (kenosis). However, this enfleshing of God within materiality quite conversely liberates the physicality of the world; the body of Christ, passing by, fills Malle and Wat with such ‘joy’ and ‘dread’ that Malle declares, ‘We shall brast’.⁶⁰ This body expands the purview of all others.

This reaching compelled by the presence of Christ incarnate in Yorkshire is always a reaching *after* or *towards*, and never a grasping. Still, contact occurs, though fleeting, a brushing of the body against God through the particularity of earth. After Christ has passed from view, Prescott tells of Malle and Wat that

They crouched on the hillside, looking towards God, feeling God under their spread palms on the grass, and through the soles of their feet. Beyond, beyond, beyond, and beyond again, but always that which went still beyond—God. And here, with only a low wooden gate between, that thing which man could never of himself have thought, and would never come to the depth of for all his thinking, here that thing impossible was true as daylight, here was God in man, here All in a point.⁶¹

They sense God through the ground—reading divine presence on the earth’s text like Braille—but this presence is, at the same time, absent. ‘Beyond’: the body which is the object of attention here does not stay still; in the motion of the body from one place to another, and thus in its change over time, the body disturbs what it passes over or through, making a mark, leaving a trace, drawing gazes, even followers, in its wake. This trace is not unlike Ricoeur’s idea of the place of the document or memorial in historical time, a present sign of something that has passed. Both provide a connection between the one who perceives the trace and that other from which the trace remains. Ricoeur writes that ‘To follow a trace...is to effect practically the fusion of two sides of the trace’, so that the person who does the tracing is, in a sense, simultaneously addressing and being addressed by both the present and the past.⁶² For history, this always means a looking back, a bringing of the past into the present; in *The Man on a Donkey*, though, it is not just the past that is being fused with the present, but rather

⁵⁹ MoaD 387.

⁶⁰ MoaD 387.

⁶¹ MoaD 387.

⁶² NT 345.

multiple perceptions of time—several pasts and several futures—are connecting at the point of the present. Just as Ricoeur declares that ‘At this price we now no longer have to say that the past is something over and done with in any negative sense but can say that it is something that has been and, because of this, is now preserved in the present’, one can read in the novel’s acts of tracing an assertion that a presence of divine chronology remains.⁶³

Apart from this episode in the middle of the novel, the idea of a trace in liturgical time appears as the frame for the work’s entire narrative. In a prologue called ‘The Beginning and the End’ Malle, having returned to the then-dissolved priory of Marrick after several years away, goes looking for the Christ she had seen so long before. She does not find any sign of him by the gate near the woods, in the kitchen, the Great Court, the prioress’ chamber, the stables or the church. Finally, however, she comes to the Frater, which had fallen out of use during the priory’s last few decades; there, Malle finds the remnants of the last meal the last eleven nuns ate before being turned out, as they had returned to the old communal practice of eating together.⁶⁴ The epilogue, ‘The End and the Beginning’, makes clear what Malle finds there in ‘crumbled bread and empty egg shells’, ‘a piece of broiled fish’ and ‘half a honeycomb’: a sign of the Lord’s Supper, of real presence, for ‘She knew then that He had been there, and that they had given Him to eat of these things so short a time before that the comb still oozed into the dish transparent gold from its severed cells’.⁶⁵ Christ does not appear in the expected places—either in sanctuaries and great chambers or in the locations where Malle had seen him before—but is traced to a hastily-eaten meal, accompanying the nuns in their distress and disarray. The materiality of fragments of food, of leftovers and detritus, constitutes a concrete mark of bodily fellowship right at the aporia, at the place of disjunction. It is in the transitory nature of human life, in the flux of the body as demonstrated and produced by processes such as eating and drinking and the necessary worries of the daily round, that the trace which makes present the

⁶³ NT 345.

⁶⁴ MoaD 11-3.

⁶⁵ MoaD 745-6.

fruitfulness of multiple narratives may be found and followed. The trace requires the body's irreducibility.⁶⁶

Conclusion: A Body's Trace, All in a Point

The narrated times and lives in *The Man on a Donkey* aptly manifest the disjunctions at the heart of human experience of the body. People find themselves caught in many different currents at once; the body belongs to the social and political system in which people live and to the system of faith to which they adhere, all while being bound to the body's own concrete limitations, to the turnings and yearnings incarnated in specific locations and gazes. At the level of the body, then, even where we human beings are at our most individual, there we are also at our most plural in how we see and understand. There we slip and split along the many currents which carry us. However, if we keep to the idea of the trace, we can turn this around and see it from a different angle altogether. If the body is the site where human beings are aware of the disjunctions in our experience of self and world, it is also the place where the many currents of that experience move towards a confluence. The body connects the many worlds of different perspectives, forming a pivot where worlds weave together, intersecting at the point of the flesh so that at this material site the different currents become a multiplicity of possibilities, instead of only pulling the individual in different directions. Just as a document or memorial acts to fuse the present and the past, the body's pivot can be the trace which one can follow from one possible narrated perspective to another. Physical being enfleshes the coexistence of worlds—if by 'worlds' one means the plurality of ways that people experience the living of their lives and the forces that act upon them (the plurality of worlds to which Prescott points in her

⁶⁶ In many ways, this resembles the tactile maps and relational geography deduced earlier from Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass*, in which a person holds onto stories and memories of loved ones through the precious few physical traces left behind after death and other passings. However, what I am focusing on here is the idea that the junctions and disjunctions where bodies meet exist as several different intersecting systems of narration to which the body belongs simultaneously. The two chapters make a pair, investigating the multivalent aspects of tracing the body: tracing as in drawing, outlining, and imprinting; and tracing as in following, tracking, and traversing the distance between oneself and another.

opening note)—and provides a point of intersection of all the understandings made available to people by the different currents which carry them.⁶⁷

Holding the body as a trace does not and should not mean negating or even downplaying the experience of the body as the location of disjunction, however. The forces which splinter human worlds and problematise the choosing of any course of action remain; moreover, the reality of the different currents which act upon human beings and generate conflicts of loyalty do not affect the will alone but impinge upon the whole of (and wholeness of) life—the fates of the chief characters chronicled in *The Man on a Donkey* should show the book's readers that. The disjunctions of the body are capable of tearing into flesh and fragmenting life. What this means is that the body is simultaneously the site of junction and disjunction. Yet it is precisely the tension between these two contradicting tendencies that produces creative possibility. Because both are indissoluble, their combination undermines any desire to reduce embodied experience to one or the other, pushing people to negotiate the field generated between the contradictions: making sense of the events and stories in which any person is involved entails that person navigating the different currents in which she or he is embedded, choosing a path from among a range of possibilities, interacting not only with the forces of different worlds of perception but also with other persons. This navigation is a creative act, a participation in the making of the world. In *The Man on a Donkey*, Prescott points to this creative potential with the passage of Christ through the novel. This body, which refuses to be pinned down, represents both disjunction and junction in Jesus' suffering love. To Prescott here, God offers a way to orient oneself in

⁶⁷ Theologically speaking, this recalls Tertullian's words: 'Caro salutis est cardo', 'the flesh is the pivot of salvation' (as quoted by Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body* 43). It is at the point of the materiality of creation that a fractured world's mending is worked out. That is, any hopeful narration of time must take account of physical being. Although Tertullian was thinking about the necessity for any doctrine of atonement and resurrection to be able to proclaim the redemption of the body because the body is the weakest part of human being and most susceptible to falling—not necessarily something I would want to stress—nonetheless the need for an account of the saving work of God to address the body can be maintained. Looking at this through the lens of the the body as a site of the meeting of many different currents pulling upon human beings, any attempt to narrate salvation must tell a tale which holds these currents together; what type of salvation would it be if it only affected one strand of existence but did nothing to remedy the brokenness and distortions in other areas of life?

In Christian theology, another way of putting this is christologically—to proclaim Jesus Christ as the person who, in his body, best shows the flesh as the intersection of perspectives and the pivot that connects worlds, the person whose materiality best exhibits the ability to hold together beneficially the tension of the junctions and disjunctions of life.

the world, to navigate joy and pain, to bring together heaven and earth, so to speak, ‘All in a point’.⁶⁸

That is one reading. The great possibility of creativity in the way embodiment comprises both junction and disjunction also leads to an instability of meaning; interpretations may differ, perceptions will not be the same from one person to another. *The Man on a Donkey*, with its plurality of worlds and times, with the various possible strands of narration, asks readers to make a choice. The form of the novel, as a linear chronicle held between a prologue and an epilogue narrating a later moment, instantiates the choosing: which is the primary story, the history revealed in tragedy or the ironic tale of Malle made evident only to the reader’s privileged vantage point? As noted above, Raleigh’s article on the novel gives interpretative weight to the historical tragedy, so that the religious aspects of the book comprise, at most, a wistful longing for an era that has faded away, replaced by secular modernity. Raleigh writes that the book’s Christ who ‘can be recognized only by madmen, simpletons, children, and the birds and the beasts of the field’ is ‘A Christ receding backwards into the primitive origins of religious belief’; he describes the Christian virtues of ‘Faith, Hope, and Charity’ as being ‘reduced to faint echoes in the tragic world of the novel’.⁶⁹ Yet, truly, one might say, what else could you expect when all the hopes and dreams, and lives, of the five chief characters, followed closely for nigh on seven hundred fifty pages, get crushed by the religious, social, and historical forces which entangle them? The darkness can seem overwhelming. At the very end of the novel, Malle takes pages from illuminated manuscripts—all which have been pulled apart by the new, Protestant tenants of the former priory—and makes them into little boats. The pages include three passages from Julian of Norwich, and two from the Nicene Creed in Latin. Malle sets the words of hope and love into the river, and the book ends with them ‘dipping and dancing away towards the sea’.⁷⁰ Raleigh writes that thus ‘Hope in all its fragility is faintly adumbrated in the closing chapter of this “panorama of sin and suffering”’.⁷¹ The literary critic portrays this ending as faith floating away along the current of time. But

⁶⁸ MoaD 387.

⁶⁹ Raleigh 167.

⁷⁰ MoaD 748.

⁷¹ Raleigh 168.

while the scene does have an elegiac sense, the little ships of faith's hope are not merely sailing off to be overwhelmed in the ocean: they are also, in a way, being offered to readers, presented by the author in terms of a choice readers can make. Is this the end, or is this the beginning, a possibility for seeing God as present among us and caring in the midst of suffering? The entire book can be seen to act as those fragile ships of words, caught in the currents which carry the body, too, sending out a world and its stories for readers to pick up and interpret. It is always possible that a reader will choose to see mainly the tragedy, or that a reader will catch hold of hope. This suspense, this catch of the breath at what is not, in the end, decided for us, generates creative potential because it grants a person the opportunity to participate in making the world new.⁷²

⁷² One might note the similarity of this ending to the ending of *MG*, where imagines a toy canoe floating down the St. Lawrence to the Atlantic where, finally, it is destroyed by the relentless waves of the sea. As they construct their worlds, both novels create a space for the reader's interpretation, though perhaps Urquhart's is a little more tenuous and fragile even than Prescott's.

nterlude IV



odies turn.

Sometimes they are lighter, less substantial than imagined; the gentlest ripple of breeze or wave will lift them, and the least amount of force spins them in a new direction. Sometimes, though, bodies are heavier than you expect, appearing to anchor the world in their weight: then, only great effort sets them loose. But bodies turn, and all their story-strands with them; their panoply of ghosts and dreams hang about them like a flotilla brought to bear on the assumed destination of their travels.

Bodies turn like toy boats cast adrift. When Malle makes boats out of the leaves from illuminated manuscripts in *The Man on a Donkey*, you can imagine them slowly bobbing this way and that before settling into a current. You can imagine them also to be corporeal prayers, petitions offered up and gleaming in the sunlight. Likewise, at the end of *A Map of Glass*, when Jerome recalls a story of a toy canoe sent on a long journey downstream to the sea, you can envision the longings of a boy's imagination that convey that canoe past wondrous, far-off places. Both the expectation of adventure and the probability of loss become the freight of these vessels—but which one you choose to emphasise is your choice. Where the boats go and how long they last depend on outside forces, but also on the way they are made. That is, much depends on what readers bring to the choice, on where their faith lies.

Bodies turn to the call of another, to the summons of a voice. This, too, is a choice: the decision to follow or not. This is something that Ricoeur saw; in his exposition of the narrative self, he has people model their own narratives after their favourite stories, deciding among the variations provided by the plots and characters. Much the same can be seen in *The Man on a Donkey*, with the proffered choice between claims on the body. A person is summoned to interpret among the many possibilities; in this judgement, one discerns the body.

But sometimes bodies turn on the pivot of mystery. The unknown other becomes the character who knocks on the door of an author's imagination and begs to be put in writing. Strange lands enchant your dreams and beckon to your feet. Make-believe as the invention of the body, and not just trying on roles, is where Ricoeur does not seem to have gone. For this, the art that blurs fiction and history, author and story, we look to bodies that turn at the sound of their name, bodies which offer their dreams.

Chapter Nine

The Narrated Body:
The Art of Identity and Sanctification
in
Frederick Buechner's *Godric*



bout identity,¹ the American writer and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, has mused

For who am I? I know only that heel and toe, memory and metatarsal, I am everything that turns, all of a piece, unthinking, at the sound of my name. Am where my feet take me. Buechner. Come unto me, you say. I, Buechner, all of me, unknowing and finally unknowable even to myself, turn. O Lord and lover, I come if I can to you down through the litter of any day, through sleeping and waking and eating and saying goodbye and going away and coming back again. Laboring and laden with endless histories on my back.²

This ‘everything that turns’ describes the motion of response, the body and the stories it carries directing its countenance towards the other’s call. The question of identity is not only that basic query ‘Who am I?’ but also ‘Who are you?’ and ‘How do we fit together, you and I?’, these last the results of our experience of and contact with those who are other than ourselves. We enact identity in all the ways that we meet the world, in the face that we show and in the stories by whose telling we seek, in concert with others, to make sense of the moments that we live. Yet of these stories it is not enough to say ‘labouring...*with*’ as if those narratives are only burdens to be stoically endured; one need also say ‘labouring *for*’. The stories in their endlessness are part of the art of formulating identity: woven together, they present a narrated body, a self, in the world of imagination generated between storyteller and listeners.

This chapter will draw out that art of identity by looking more closely at the work of Frederick Buechner, particularly his novel, *Godric*. In this fictionalised autobiography of a mediaeval English hermit, the title character narrates his life story as memories and reflections prompted by the unwelcome ministrations of a hagiographer who wants to present Godric as a saint. Episodes portraying the vantage point from the end of Godric’s life and the people around him at that time intersperse the narrative of his memories. Essentially, the book creates its imaginary world out of the tension between two competing narratives, that of the hagiographer monk, Reginald, and that of Godric’s no-holds-barred reminiscences. However, there is a third thread—that of Godric’s body itself, which tells a complicated tale: the same body fails Godric, reveals his joys and his sorrows, and is that which he seeks to bring to submission in the path of

¹ For my discussion of the definition and construction of identity and its connection to the body, as formulated by Ricoeur, see Chapter Four.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* 29.

asceticism that he follows. The body relates its story through no voice of its own but obliquely, through the observations of Godric, the art of the author, and even the imagination of the reader. If, though, for Buechner, a person comes to another ‘down through the litter of any day’, then what meetings, feelings, and experiences are anchored in the body matter to what any person’s self, any character, is, whether in fiction or not. Buechner has also written that ‘At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography’.³ What you write about, themes and mysteries and the grasping at meaning, reveal something about yourself, not to some void but to particular individuals who participate in the making with you. The art of identity in the book *Godric* involves more bodies than the fictional character and the historical personage; the bodies of the artist, the readers, the text—and now, dare I say, you—have all been drafted into the composition of this world to work together to establish identities.

To explore how these embodied narratives all connect, I begin by examining the novel itself, looking first at the different interpretations of Godric’s life that characters propose and then at what Godric’s body does both to disturb and to confirm these narratives. This chapter then turns to the world of the text as constituted by the author, the readers, and theological and literary assumptions, before presenting some conclusions about the work of literary and theological art in constructing a plurality of identities.

***Godric*, book and body**

Godric has already lived many years as a solitary when Reginald comes to him, sent by Godric’s friend Ailred of Rievaulx to record the hermit’s life and ‘unbushel the light of [his] days for the schooling of children’.⁴ As a hagiographer, Reginald strives to declare the holiness of Godric’s story that others may emulate him. The monk sets the tone for his version of Godric’s life early on, giving the etymology of his subject’s name as ‘God reigns’ and saying that ‘It means when God comes down at last to weigh the souls of men, he’ll not find Godric’s wanting’.⁵ He outlines every event in the light

³ Buechner, *Alphabet of Grace* 3.

⁴ Buechner, *Godric* 6.

⁵ *Godric*, 17.

of godliness, seeing always an advance in God's work, interpreting even Godric's own objection that he foully sinned as nothing more than exemplifying the man's humility.⁶ By the end of the book, while summing up the life he has chronicled, Reginald proclaims,

Of Godric's sanctity there can be no doubt. Although he himself was wont to deprecate them, none can count the deeds of charity that he wrought for the betterment of man nor the austerities he practised for the love of God.⁷

This becomes the church's official rendering of Godric, the solitary of Finchale on the River Wear. His life demonstrates the strain towards righteousness.

Godric objects strenuously, however. Part of his antagonism stems from a dislike of the monk-writer's fawning nature. In a word to the reader, Godric admits that Reginald has 'got him such a honeyed way that I'm ever out to sour it'.⁸ More than that, though, Godric does not want or believe in the saccharine take on his life; as much as the sinful acts of his past distress him, they are his past, and they cannot in good conscience be glossed over. In response he rails,

Know Godric's no true hermit but a gadabout within his mind, a lecher in his dreams. Self-seeking he is and peacock proud. A hypocrite. A ravener of alms and dainty too. A slothful, greedy bear. Not worthy to be called a servant of the Lord when he treats such servants as he has himself like dung, like Reginald. All this and worse than this go say of Godric in your book.⁹

He is stung by his own past, a penitent who does not think that he deserves the attention of a hagiographer and certainly not the appellation 'saint'.

Thus Godric spins out his own version. He tells of his childhood, his leave-taking from home, his time as a merchant and then sailor turned pirate. He relates his work as a steward for a lord of the realm, and his time keeping a rather worldly bishop company. Always he lays bare his sinfulness. Where Reginald would say that Godric left home 'to educate himself meticulously and persistently in the ways of worldly circumspection', Godric would say the ways of 'worldly greed'.¹⁰ Where his

⁶ *Godric* 18.

⁷ *Godric* 174.

⁸ *Godric* 17.

⁹ *Godric* 21.

¹⁰ *Godric* 166-7.

hagiographer would say that Godric left the service of a nobleman ‘for love of Christ’, the hermit notes how his leaving was selfish preservation from damnation, as it abandoned the innocent to fend for themselves in the clutch of a greedy and mean-spirited landlord.¹¹ And so on.

Yet, despite his indignation at the whitewashing ways of Reginald, sorrow rather than anger sets the prevailing tone of Godric’s reminiscence. Along with the confessions, Godric tells of pilgrimages, visions and his induction into the solitary life.¹² These accounts resonate with regret: for example, his second time on Lindisfarne, having gone there not to pray but to hide the treasures from his piracy, he thinks he sees St. Cuthbert himself but ‘his face was full of grief’ and the vision vanishes leaving Godric kneeling ‘till [his] beard froze stiff with tears’.¹³ The gift of second sight does nothing to cheer him—for he sees only what death will come to such as Perkin, a servant so dear he is like his own son.¹⁴ All his tales bind up together with leavings and with loss, with the parting of ways from family, friends and mentors—from all whom he loves. His sadness at his sins he feels most of all from the wounding he has given to those near and dear to him: his companion snakes, whom he has sent away in a fit when they were distracting him from his prayers; his partner at piracy, Mouse, from whom he parts with anger, never to see again; his father, not met again after Godric left home with barely a word, as his father dies while he was away.¹⁵

Godric blames himself, the appetite of his flesh, the limitations of his body. After his snake friends have left him, he wonders if they forgive him, reflecting ‘If they but knew, it was not the coldness but the warmth of Godric’s bowels for them that made him drive them off’ for his earthy love of their company made it ‘hard to fasten on the airy love of God’.¹⁶ He bemoans that even old age does not dull his lusts, wailing ‘Let a maid but pass my way with sport in her eye and her braid a-swinging, and I burn for her

¹¹ *Godric* 80, 86-88.

¹² See the chapters ‘How Godric fared on the holy isle of Farne’, ‘Of Rome, a maiden, and a bear’, and ‘Of Elric, demons, and how Godric first saw Wear’, among others.

¹³ *Godric* 49.

¹⁴ *Godric* 57-8.

¹⁵ *Godric* 163-4, 93-4, 103.

¹⁶ *Godric* 28.

although my wick's long since burnt out' and lamenting that 'young Godric's dreams well up to flood old Godric's prayers'.¹⁷ He despairs that

Lust is the ape that gibbers in our loins. Tame him as we will by day, he rages all the wilder in our dreams by night. Just when we think we're safe from him, he raises up his ugly head and smirks, and there's no river in the world flows cold and strong enough to strike him down. Almighty God, why dost thou deck men out with such a loathsome toy?¹⁸

Godric thinks of his body as the location of spiritual struggle, the true stumbling block on the pilgrimage of his efforts to be a good man. The body and the flesh distract one's self towards peril, being ever open to temptation.

Not that the body in itself is evil unreservedly—the issue is never as stark and simplistic as that—rather, the body is where saintliness and sinfulness meet and mingle, and the problem lies in the confusion. The body constitutes the site of both suffering the greatest failure and enacting the greatest kindness, the most intimate attention given to another, only that greatest kindness all too easily becomes the greatest failure. This lies at the heart of the version of Godric's life that he would tell, wishing that Reginald would write that

The worst that Godric ever did, he did for love. Nor was it an earthy sort that seeks its own but love that gives itself away for the beloved's sake, and thus, when all is said and done, the love that God himself commands.¹⁹

To Godric, the best and worst of himself entwine inexorably, and this manifests itself at the point of contact with those around him, particularly those he holds dearest. The 'worst' to which Godric refers here is an incident which occurs one night several years after he retires to his solitary cell along the bank of the River Wear. His unmarried brother and sister, William and Burcwen, have settled near him, the culmination of a passionately unstable sibling relationship chronicled throughout the novel. Godric sees his sister bathing, and he is flooded by a sudden confrontation with all his frustrated desires. He decides to avoid his sister thereafter, but she unsurprisingly construes this as a lack of love, and becomes truly sick at heart. Their brother eventually begs Godric to speak to her, and Godric's heart opens to her plight. He asks her to come to his cell, she

¹⁷ *Godric* 40.

¹⁸ *Godric* 153.

¹⁹ *Godric* 155.

does, and all the intimacies of their hopes and dreams are unleashed. As Godric puts it: he thought that ‘by God’s grace’ he had ‘curbed [his] grosser sins at last’ but then ‘all at once they broke their bonds’ and ‘he lay with her whom ties of tenderness and love and holy law...forbade’.²⁰ But to Godric things got even worse: he tells how their brother came seeking Burcwen, Godric lied to him, and William in his worry went looking by the river—where he drowned. Love and horror tangle up in the meeting of bodies. To move towards another, to turn towards a relationship, does not just mean making yourself vulnerable, it also means making someone else vulnerable to you, to your body and your passions. If your identity involves all that turns at the sound of your name, then it includes this terrible risk of being and making vulnerable, too.

In response to the tumults of his desires, Godric sets out to discipline his body. Starting from a bath in the Holy Land’s Jordan River, he goes unshod all the way back to England and for the rest of his days.²¹ When he finally settles into a hermit’s life, he takes to bathing often in the river to teach ‘old One-eye...a lesson that he never learned though wiser, you’d think, for sixty winters’ dunking in bone-chilling, treacherous Wear’.²² He describes how the numbness frees him from his flesh, from himself, allows him to praise God ‘for all we lose, for all the river of the years bears off’.²³ Godric also wears an iron vest to mortify his flesh, sometimes going so far as to hurl himself against the stone wall of his cave home.²⁴ To the hermit, this ascetic programme comprises a quest for self-control. He wants his identity to point to the assertion of the spiritual as master over the material. This mastery, though, is not a denial of the body; a vision Godric has of a fiercely passionate John the Baptist underlines this well by instructing the hermit to ‘Dwell here alone and by hot striving to be pure become a torch to light men’s way and scorch the wings of fiends’.²⁵ The training of the body intends to purify the flesh for leading an agonistic life, battling temptations and mortal weakness to be an example of hope while fending off evil.

²⁰ *Godric* 158.

²¹ *Godric* 106.

²² *Godric* 3.

²³ *Godric* 96.

²⁴ *Godric* 81.

²⁵ *Godric* 143.

Yet, if Reginald's version tells of a saint who always triumphs over evil and Godric's version tells of a sinner who struggles valiantly to rein in his baser nature, it is here, in the discipline of the body, that a third version of the hermit's life emerges. First of all, it becomes clear that beyond the self-control, more than a little self-punishment is involved. He tries to pay for the pain he has inflicted upon others by afflicting himself. However, his body resists at every turn, as Godric admits when he notes that his flesh never learns the lesson he wants to teach. His desires slip their bonds, and not only when he strays into sin. They appear when Godric finds enjoyment in the natural world.²⁶ They belie the script that the body tends towards sin, or that the body's desires do, as these also seek charity and loving-kindness for others in ways established corporeally. Godric kisses a leper out of mercy, and people come to visit him not for preaching but for his touch.²⁷ The body becomes the site where blessing and grace are received, too. When Godric leaves home for the first time, the priest blesses his eyes, ears and lips, that he might 'see God's image' in everyone, 'hear the cry...of the poor', and speak 'truth'.²⁸ When a maiden angel visits him while he is returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, she comforts him less with her words than with bodily tenderness, washing his feet.²⁹ Even where his solitary life of holiness is concerned, the body does not simply offer an obstacle to communion with God in the world. The images given by the hermit who tutors Godric in the way of solitude is that he would 'wear the river as [his] scarf', the sky as 'cap', and the rain as 'cloak'.³⁰ The meeting of body and world becomes essential to that kind of life of devotion.

The body's version thus undercuts both Godric's and Reginald's versions: unlike what Godric says, the body is not always about contest, but unlike what Reginald sees, the body is not always inconsequential to sanctity, either. Yet, instead of simply refuting these narratives, the body as described weaves among them. Sometimes it confirms them, too. The body does fail: Godric finds himself unable to live up to the holiness he desires. His life story *is* a long tale of treacheries, sorrows, and leaving the

²⁶ Such as when Godric lovingly describes Lindisfarne or the River Wear (*Godric* 35-8, 95-6, 143-4).

²⁷ *Godric* 41-3.

²⁸ *Godric* 24.

²⁹ *Godric* 71.

³⁰ *Godric* 119.

good fight behind. In the end, physicality holds a terrible fragility. Age means Godric cannot do what he could in the past, cannot do for himself what dignity would wish, and can control his body even less than in his prime.³¹ In his final moments, he loses motor control and the ability to speak, and cannot even rail at Reginald's book.³² For a last word, the body speaks 'Frailty' and dumbfounds both Reginald's saint-making and Godric's ethic of struggle.

Or, rather, the next-to-last word: it turns out that the body has been speaking a more final word throughout the novel. This is a word said in response, a word of reception. The body is not only the site where the self struggles against the self in a battle of the will, or where one only acts outwardly toward the world, but also where others move towards you—where others touch you. Although Godric has focused on his struggle to be good, his body has always marked the impression of others upon his life. Near the beginning of the novel, Godric speaks of friends and how he and they have inscribed their traces on one another, declaring, 'What's friendship, when all's done, but the giving and taking of wounds?'³³ But though this mutuality of wounding which binds the best of friends guides Godric's sorrowful reminiscences, the friendship made evident at the point of touch, at the body, stretches beyond that. Where he fails, his companions move forward alongside with him, to keep contact, with comfort and tenderness. When Godric decides to carve his own tomb, Perkin helps him, then makes him try it out for size, which Godric does, but before the old hermit can haul himself out again, Perkin climbs in beside him. The two lie entombed only for a moment but that togetherness communicates enough for Godric to imagine a little less loneliness in death.³⁴ Later, when Godric is dying, and he would ask forgiveness of Reginald if only he could speak, Perkin moves Godric's hand to bless the hagiographer's work.³⁵ Even after Godric is dead, friends continue to attend to his body, as the two snakes return to keep watch from a distance.³⁶ In the body's version, beside the frailty, relationship offers recapitulation, a manifestation of redemption. More than this, identity is revealed

³¹ *Godric* 40-1, 88.

³² *Godric* 168-71.

³³ *Godric* 7.

³⁴ *Godric* 97-8.

³⁵ *Godric* 170.

³⁶ *Godric* 173.

not in struggles, successes or failures, but in the connections created and maintained, however tenuously, among one's self and others in the world.

Autobiography and Interconnected Fictions

'I am everything...that turns at the sound of my name.'³⁷ In *Godric*, Buechner through his art as author demonstrates this. In the world of the novel, the artist works around the characters and with them, presenting images and generating implicit possibilities, knitting a space where grace may be seen. But what about the world outside of the text? What does it matter, and how does it connect?

In the relationship between art and identity, the question for the novel becomes 'Who is the book *Godric* about?' Whose identity does the novel reveal, or proclaim, or imagine (or perhaps obscure)? If, as Buechner himself says, much of fiction is essentially autobiography, then the book tells about him. In many non-fiction works and in interviews, Buechner has made the connection himself between events in novels and events in his own life.³⁸ About *Godric* in particular, Buechner has said that it 'in a funny way, grew out of my memory and non-memory of my father'.³⁹ The author has linked the novel to gaining a new understanding of faith and growing old, to trusting God in the face of death.⁴⁰ Psychoanalytic criticism would endorse Buechner's own explanations that much of his writing is 'a form of self-discovery'.⁴¹ However, *Godric* is not Frederick Buechner, no matter how often interviewers and commentators want to make connection between characters and plots revelatory of the novelist's own life and faith. Replying to one interviewer, Buechner said

³⁷ Buechner, *Alphabet of Grace*, 29.

³⁸ Most notable of his non-fiction works are a series of spiritual autobiographies, including *The Sacred Journey, Now and Then*, and *Telling Secrets*, as well as writing about writing, such as *The Alphabet of Grace*. Several scholars have discussed the relationship between Buechner's writing and his life; see, for examples, James Woelfel, 'Frederick Buechner: The Novelist as Theologian', and Heidi N. Sjostrom, 'Buechner's Concrete Evidence of the Transcendent'. Among interviews, look at Frederick Buechner, interview with Dale W. Brown in *Of Fiction and Faith: Twelve American Writers Talk about Their Vision and Work* 29-54; interview with Richard A. Kauffman; and interview with Wendy Murray Zoba.

³⁹ Buechner, 'Flesh and Blood'.

⁴⁰ Buechner, 'All's Lost—All's Found', *A Room Called Remember* 188-9.

⁴¹ Victoria Allen, 'Coming Home in the Writings of Frederick Buechner' 35.

At a time when I was in desperate need, out of that deep place came this holy old man about whom I knew nothing, and he became really for me a kind of saint. I can't explain it. The words were mine; I put every word he says into his mouth. It was my pen, but I was drawing on this deep source.⁴²

Rather than simply a masquerade for himself, Godric becomes a person who addresses the author. This Godric never lived, but is more fully alive than most.

One fancies a sly wink from the writer at his art. For all the talk about fiction as autobiography, something more seems to be happening here. The novel itself has an identity, created in the imagination of a literary world, not just of Buechner's but including the books and stories that the author has read and all the people he has known. In the self that swings towards another at the call of one's name, the whole array of connections between texts swings to address that other, too. Thus, the novel *Godric* carries its literary allusions with it. For example, Buechner very often talks about Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* when he discusses literature and religion.⁴³ In one interview, he goes so far as to declare that 'Ever since I read that book, every work of fiction I've written has been about a "saint" like that whiskey-priest—not a plaster saint, not a moral exemplar, but a person whose feet are just as much of clay as your feet and my feet'.⁴⁴ Buechner's reading of Greene thus very explicitly informs the identity of the protagonists and other characters he has been crafting. He invokes the literary discussion on what it means 'to be a saint'.⁴⁵ *Godric* performs a variation on the theme of the deeply-flawed person who nonetheless becomes a locus of God's grace in and to the world—in this case, pondering what might happen if such a person is recognised as saintly during his own life—and layering that depth tells us more about the hermit than we knew because we have met his like before.

A second example has a less explicit source. In the novel, Buechner emphasises Ailred of Rievaulx's place as a friend of Godric, while neglecting other patrons of the

⁴² Buechner, 'Frederick Buechner', 44.

⁴³ Mentions of Greene's novel occur in a wide range of Buechner's writing from a sermon published in 1966 ('To Be a Saint', *The Magnificent Defeat* 116-24) to more recent interviews (such as with Brown and Kauffman). In the essay 'Summons to Pilgrimage', *A Room Called Remember* 156-7, Buechner calls *The Power and the Glory* a 'religious book' in distinction from a book about religion.

⁴⁴ Buechner, 'Ordained'.

⁴⁵ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* 210.

hermit.⁴⁶ A reader might call to mind that one of Ailred's most well-known works is the treatise *Spiritual Friendship*, in which the Cistercian abbot writes of the value of friends linked to his own distinctive reading of 1 John 4:16: 'he that abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in him'.⁴⁷ Buechner does not mention the treatise in his novel, or anywhere else, according to my research so far. Thus, no proof exists that he wrote *Godric* with any thought of Ailred's *Spiritual Friendship*. However, the reader can still add the latter to the polyvalence of the novel, intuiting the hint that friendship's path to the presence of God deconstructs the win-or-lose dictum of Godric's ethos of spiritual struggle. Whether Buechner intended this or not, Ailred and his treatise become part of the constellation of embodied connections that make up the identity at play here.

If these two examples seem to illustrate tenets of both intertextual theory and reader-response criticism, that is because they do. They show the interconnected nature of texts, the way words and phrases point to other fields of meaning and are transformed in the process; they also allude to the way a text's meanings are discerned at the point of reading and interpretation.⁴⁸ In a way, they dilute the place of the author in determining who the book is about. Buechner in many ways is just as much a character as is Godric, only letting us know what he tells us about himself, and for all that he in so many places tells about his writing, the actual process behind the text remains more or less hidden. Yet, just because the author cannot be fully determined or known from his writings does not mean that the author's identity has no part in the reading. Buechner still wrote the book, composing the words and laying out themes and issues. The book is part of the face that he turns to the world, to the other people around him. Only, it is shared: once you have read the book, its story becomes another of those laid upon your back, another memory with which you turn in response to the call of your name.

We have heard Reginald's version, and Godric's: the book as a whole, with the tale told by Godric's body, makes Buechner's version—Buechner's version of what it

⁴⁶ For biographical information on the people around the historical Godric, see Victoria Tudor, 'Godric of Finchale [St Godric of Finchale] (c.1070–1170)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. For the information which would have been available for Buechner to consult when he wrote the novel see the 1890 edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* available as an archive of the online version cited here.

⁴⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* 70, 66.

⁴⁸ Thus I in turn invoke Julia Kristeva (see especially 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', *The Kristeva Reader* 34–61), Mikhail Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imagination*), Louise M. Rosenblatt (*The Reader, The Text, The Poem*), and others.

means to be a saint. Readers can piece this together, looking at friendship's embodiment of faith and care going beyond the struggle to be good—can see also a life spent trying to understand. Early in the book, after Godric believes that Jesus has saved him from death, he wonders, 'though saved him why or saved for what deep end he did not learn, nor has he learned it to this day'.⁴⁹ In a sense, all of the book of the life of Godric tells him puzzling over that riddle and, in the same sense, this is the question of identity for Buechner: 'Who am I, that I am loved?' And if the saint plods along as clay-footed as the rest of us, which can be inverted to say that all of us in our own ways are saints, then all of us plod along after the answer to that question for the establishment of our own identity. Buechner does allude to an answer, later in the book, when he describes a vision that Godric has of 'a face of shadows and of leaves' which mouths his name; to Godric, this face is Christ's own.⁵⁰ The suggested answer, then, is to change the question into a statement of faith: 'I am one who is loved'. To figure out identity means in large part to figure out with whom you identify, and who will identify with you—who will, for better or worse, stand beside you. This identification is embodied in our relationships. The relational mode extends to art, too; what is embodied in the book is not just the author's self-discovery but a quest enjoined mutually by writer and reader, always seeking the why and witnessing to being ones who are loved.

Still, this is not enough. This continues to suggest that identity is something to be found among a group if not individually. This implies that art is but a tool for unearthing what is hidden. But as we have seen, Godric the character is an artistic creation, a new identity added to the world. If your identity includes all that you are, and that includes all the stories and poems and images you dream and share, then your identity continues to be created as much as your relationships grow and change. Our identity is not a fixed, focused point that we possess. A person is a constellation of embodied connections, a network of memories and dreams anchored in the body but played out in community, into the world, but this is always shifting and being remade; and, theologically speaking, it is that assemblage which God addresses. Your identity is a creative collaboration among yourself, your companions, and God.

What we see in Buechner's novel is that Godric is more than what is said about him, more than what he says about himself, even more than what he does. His identity

⁴⁹ *Godric* 16.

⁵⁰ *Godric* 144.

appears and lives along all the connections negotiated between him and others, in the web spun in the world. So it is with everyone. Identity is always more complex, more creative and more mundane, pulling us bodily into the conversation and the imagining of worlds in contact with one another. Identity itself is an art, an art by which the reader, just a little bit, participates in redeeming the author, by helping to frame the author's identity.

Postlude



Bodies carry.

Worlds move with them on their shoulders; an array of perceptions swing round whenever they turn. Ghosts cling to their backs; memories and timelines write in plural on the surface of their skin. Bodies haul along the long and short lines of their relationships, the effects of loved ones and rivals entwined around them. Light journeys with them: the flare of visions leads them on, and hopes enable them to open their eyes. But the sharp edges of their spite go, too, and the jagged shards of broken hearts.

Bodies carry their stories with them. As they travel, they map their wildernesses. They leave traces on all the people and places they touch. They weave the landscape into fabrics of words or music during the production and reading of texts.

There are few bodies I know as well as fictional ones—probably not even my own. For this thesis, I have read of Anil, Sarath, Gamini, and Ananda; of Sylvia, Jerome, Branwell and Annabelle; of Jakob, Athos, Alex, Michaela, and Ben; of Christabel, Darcy, Aske, Julian, Dawe, and Malle; of Godric, Reginald, Perkin, William, and Burcwen: they populate my imagination as authors expose them to my attention and I (re)construct them from my interpretation of their stories. The protagonists who show me so much of their lives, their thoughts, and the travels of their bodies let me imagine them with a certainty that evades the workings of my own flesh and the people I touch. Yet, they do not show everything. These bodies have secrets, too, shadows on the other side of the text which lend depth and believability.

In their variety and particularity, these fictional bodies are paradoxical. They are all more than they appear. Their flesh exceeds the expectations of boundaries in their contact with others, and with the bodies' grips upon the places and the points that signify greatly in their stories. At the same time, they are less than they appear. Their gazes, their grasps, and their gaits are partial. This partiality can only be arranged and directed by the partiality of the author and the readers, by their interpretations and decisions, either made during conscious and conscientious engagement with texts or inherent in other choices and inheritances which make up their identity.

In this paradox of more and less, the fictional bodies link up with other bodies, all of which have greater depths than their surfaces show, but remain partial and particularly situated. Bodies appear in the play between physical limitation and mystery beyond words. In fact, it is this that the theologies which I explored neglected most: the playfulness of embodiment—the inventiveness and sheer, inexplicable exuberance that

bodies can exhibit. (Marcella Althaus-Reid's writing comes closest to this whimsy of bodies, but too soon turns talk of fetishes and bodies in love into conceptual talk of God.)

Not that this playfulness negates the harshness and pain that bodies suffer. None of the novels studied in this thesis are especially light, whimsical reads (though there are many moments of playfulness, as shown, for instance, in the poetic language of *Fugitive Pieces*). The wounds on the bodies remain, and other burdens, too. But the playfulness of the art of identity demonstrated by Frederick Buechner and *Godric* does not limit itself to fictional bodies and composition. Human beings have active roles in determining the story of their proximity to one another and their trajectories in the world: in discerning bodies.

Another great theological question: what, then, is God doing in this? It could be argued that this gives too much influence to people, and that any quick response such as to say that God makes the space for this art to happen is nothing but deistic. However, one can argue that God not only makes the space for people to knit together relationships and stories and maps of the world—and, in doing so, to participate in the reconstruction of the world—but God also keeps that space open; God calls people to become participants and companions in pursuing the goals of God's work, following the open-ended nature of the many stories that exist together in creation. Bodies, in all their complexities of constraint and creativity, remain pivots of salvation.


Bodies carry, like a sound and a voice. Like a song.

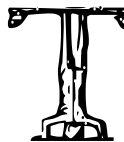
Part Threë

Liturgical Bodies

Shifted

When someone is away, when space
she usually walks through
is empty, sounds he often makes
are gone, habits of two
together are absent, you teach
yourself a change in what's
expected. You shift how you step
into a room, the way
you look at her picture or read
even the most casual
letter he wrote. You learn to live
on edges. Which is fine,
except the slightest breeze can touch
remembrance off, can send
the heart skittering, arrest you.
Contact always lingers.
Thank God.

heological bodies arise from attempts to understand the significance of bodies in the economy of salvation, in the purpose of creation, in God's mystery. Literary bodies appear as they are imagined and written and re-imagined by readers, as they play in the worlds of artistic creativity, calling from their place to ours. What, then, of liturgical bodies?

his thesis has asked, ‘What does it mean to discern the body?’, which arises from a scriptural response to the sacramental practice (or, more precisely, a lack of sacramental practice) of a particular Christian assembly of a specific time and place. I have sought to explore human embodiment as the entwinement of bodies and stories, rife with physicality, limitation, and complexity, both in the works of theologians and in novels. I have seen bodies absorbed, overlooked and co-opted, turned into metaphors and the raw material for deep thoughts. I have also seen bodies slip their snares, telling their secrets, sharing the fragility of their irreducible flesh, lingering on one another’s skin, insisting on being noticed, digressing from expectations, and carrying worlds.

But still there is more.

If liturgy is the worship discourse of a faith community, as I labelled it in the introduction to this thesis, it is a discourse of actions as well as words. Liturgies underwrite practices of bodies. Because sacraments use physical, earthly items—water, bread, wine—which take on meanings through contact with people in the context of prescribed language and action, they reveal the bodily nature of liturgies most strongly, but that bodily nature is not restricted to them. Praying, singing hymns, listening to the reading and interpretation of sacred texts, entering and moving through a worship space also entail embodied practices; contact with fellow worshippers before, during, and after services do too, as do encounters with people who are just nearby. Moreover, because a liturgy expresses the various theological traditions specific to a faith community, and simultaneously has a creative, artistic element, liturgy holds elements of both theology and literature. Discerning the liturgical body sharpens what has already been learned about bodies.

Thus, in this final part of my thesis, I return for a closer look at liturgical theology. One common approach to studying the significance of liturgy is exemplified by Dom Gregory Dix’s classic text, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, which seeks to identify the principles which drive liturgical action. Dix argues that the heart of liturgy is the Eucharist, and the heart of the Eucharist is that which it signifies, that which is the same in all instances of the celebration of the sacrament in any and every place. The problem with this is that it looks past actual bodies and their stories in the attempt to find a universal truth. This approach is common enough that even a critic of Dix’s

interpretation of liturgical history will still join in seeking meanings on the other side of bodily practice. But the materiality of sacraments remains.

The work of Gordon W. Lathrop reveals another attitude toward liturgical theology, arguing that the meanings of Christian liturgy lie primarily in the way that particular Christian communities enact them. In regular worship and devotion, faithful Christian assemblies find their approach to life reoriented even as they praise God; this reorientation is akin to finding one's way using a map. However, even this does not take into sufficient account the uniqueness of a whole, integral person, the great variety of bodies and relationships, or the shifting negotiations of interpretation and imagination; even as Lathrop attempts to value the local and the particular, he trumps that valuing by insisting on the universality and givenness of the geography which God imprints upon the faithful through liturgy.

My response is to amend Lathrop's liturgical theology in light of my studies so far, and with the help of Charles Winquist's work on selves and community as projects of becoming, which notes the unruliness of bodies. I propose, as an alternative to the search for an authoritative shape or normative pattern, consideration of various liturgies as creative sites where people shape and are shaped by their stories and by the contact of bodies. I suggest sacraments should be explored precisely at the point of their particularities, following the many relational strands which enfold the observance of liturgy. I have argued that form and content go together in generating meaning. I have indicated that the partiality of knowledge, produced by the limitations of the body, can, rather than hindering people, provide a basis for understanding relationships, emphasising mutuality, and making room for imagination. If all of this is true, then discerning the liturgical body means turning to the bodies-in-relationship enacted in a particular liturgy, rather than focusing exclusively on what universal principles might lie behind sacramental observance. Rather than narrowness, a reduction of possibilities from the universal to the specifically local, a focus on the particular is a choice to speak from one standpoint, and therefore to acknowledge, implicitly, the existence of others. The particular resists the urge to totalise, to reduce everything to a single viewpoint; it necessitates a recognition of plurality.¹ Thus, a specific liturgical location functions as one possibility among many, one story of bodies and the meaning that is expressed in their particular relationships.

¹ See the discussion of standpoint theory in the concluding section to Part One above.

Of Shapes and Patterns

TAKE. BLESS. BREAK. SHARE. These biddings call the followers of Christ to the sacrament of the Eucharist. They comprise the four-fold action set forth and celebrated in Dix's genealogical study of the rite. The body of Christ (bread and wine) mediates the body of Christ (the presence of Jesus of Nazareth) to the body of Christ (the members of the Church): much of Dix's book charts the development of Christian worship, outlining and extracting from ancient liturgical texts to demonstrate a basic continuity of Eucharistic observance since the beginning of the Christian faith. In a chapter entitled 'Behind the Local Tradition', Dix asks 'Can we hope to find in the primitive church, say in the second century, coherent universal principles which can guide our ideas about liturgy?'² Earlier, Dix states that 'If we are to penetrate to the universal principles which underline all eucharistic worship, we must be able for the moment to think ourselves out of the particular historical approach which is our own, and to free ourselves from the assumption that it is the only or the original approach'.³ His book is mainly concerned with discerning which elements need to be present to constitute a Eucharist; Dix traces those elements historically, trying to determine what all recognised liturgies and descriptions of the Eucharist have in common. For him, these 'universal principles' become definitive of what the sacrament is. He pleads for readers to have an open mind so that they might see past differences to a timeless heart which provides meaning to each and every observance of the Eucharist that has ever been.

Take. Bless. Break. Share.

Dix argues for two historical trends in early Christian liturgies, declaring that, in the time before the Council of Nicaea, the various Christian communities used different Eucharistic liturgies; later, as these churches grew together, so too did their worship practice. However, he also strives to demonstrate that an earlier (1st century CE) uniformity existed, an original rite which diversified as Christianity spread

² Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 208.

³ Dix 15.

geographically.⁴ Thus, diversification from the single tradition of the initial group of Jesus' followers later gave way to convergence—though this movement towards uniformity was never completely realised, and has always borne marks of the diffusion produced by the growth of the faith. The original practice, though, is the one which provides Dix's 'standard or model' for the evaluation of any Christian liturgy, including those already in use and new ones would arguably carry within it the best reflection of what Jesus might have meant in instituting an act of remembrance, and the closest one could get to Christ's will for the church.⁵

Not every scholar accepts Dix's interpretation of liturgical history; one objection is that no textual evidence exists for the 'original' liturgy Dix posits. An alternative theory is that a plurality of worship practices and understandings existed from the very beginning of the Christian church. Writing from this point of view, Maxwell E. Johnson proclaims that

What we see instead in these centuries is not a single tradition of Christian worship ready-made or fully formed in a tightly constructed package to be handed on unchanged to subsequent generations of the church. Rather, what is encountered here are what we might call the various building blocks of that "tradition" in development. And it is from these building blocks that the Church in subsequent generations throughout history, both through evolution in continuity with these centuries and by means of occasional revolution or reform in discontinuity, will pick and choose as it seeks to understand and express its ecclesial identity liturgically within changed historical, social, and cultural contexts in order to continue being faithful to the gospel.⁶

Here, tradition does not refer to a discrete bundle of beliefs and meanings which have been handed down to the present and which need to be safeguarded for the future; rather, tradition is the interaction with the past necessary to construct the response of the present. Historically, then, Johnson argues that the liturgical practices of Christians have always been disparate; moreover, they have always involved a creative hermeneutics in which Christians have needed to pick and choose from a plethora of worship resources what best fits a particular place and time theologically.

Dix's hypothesis has a teleological push: if there is one single, original tradition at the root of all the church's sacramental practice, then that can be the measure of the

⁴ See Dix 209-14 and 230-7, for his overview of his argument and of the theories of other scholars.

⁵ Dix 208.

⁶ Maxwell E. Johnson, 'The Apostolic Tradition', 67.

church's practice now. *The Shape of the Liturgy* reveals this motivation quite clearly, when Dix suggests that if there is no 'original universal type' to act 'as a plain and practical guide', this 'would rob the science of liturgy not only of all practical value to the church, but of its chief interest in the eyes of all but a few specialists who might continue to make it their hobby'.⁷ Tracing the roots of Christian liturgy is an exercise in finding clarity of meaning, one truth upon which to stand. Yet, although Johnson's view appears to be in opposition to Dix, both end up embracing remarkably similar positions. Johnson also looks for what emerges from early Christian liturgical history to be, in his terms, 'authoritative and normative' for the various practices of different Christian traditions today.⁸ Both Dix and Johnson appeal to an argument from origins—that whatever tradition can be traced closest to the lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth is a more authentic tradition—the difference being that Johnson's interpretation of the evidence leads him to conclude that there are multiple origins rather than one. He posits that, since early Christian liturgies remain recognisable to people in the twenty-first century, something universal must lie behind the continuity.⁹ Both Johnson and Dix seek to distil from documentary evidence the common essence of the Eucharistic service, even if Johnson refers to a 'pattern' while Dix is looking for a 'shape'.¹⁰

The unexamined assumption is that such a distillation of meaning will render a truth which is 'authoritative or normative'; neither scholar really entertains any other possibility. But this assumption leads both scholars in a quest for the universal that tends to look past the complexity of actual practice, because what Christian communities do in worship becomes representative primarily of some deeper meaning,

⁷ Dix 214.

⁸ Johnson 67. The same phrase also appears on p. 68.

⁹ Johnson 67-8.

¹⁰ For example, Johnson (somewhat grudgingly) points to the work of Gordon W. Lathrop to discern 'an authoritative, transcultural, timeless, and ecumenical liturgical *ordo*' with Justin Martyr's reports as a foundation (67). Lathrop's work, as represented by Johnson, is very much an effort to describe what is consistent among all the known traditions—to work out a common denominator for what can be considered Christian worship. This is quite similar to what Dix tries to do. The similarity between Dix's work and Johnson's increases when one realises that part of Johnson's critique of the earlier scholar apparently results from selective reading: Johnson states that 'Dix...suggests that the precise Jewish origins of the eucharistic anaphora can be discerned from this Last Supper Passover (or Pauline) context' (44). However, Dix quite clearly strives to prove that the background of the Christian eucharist lay primarily in the *chabûrah*, a Jewish fellowship meal (Dix 50ff.). That Dix seems much more willing to question received understandings than Johnson lets on, and also seems much more open to accepting a variety of antecedent influences to the shape of the one original eucharistic liturgy puts them much closer together.

something that lies elsewhere. Taking this to the extreme, liturgical practice is a façade that at best reveals truth and at worst hides it—but the practice itself does not matter much at all. Isolating universal principles, whether they provide guidance for churches today or not, can obscure the embodied nature of worship: to privilege meaning which transcends boundaries can result in ignoring the boundaries, as well as the particularities of individuals and their stories. The approach also privileges the ideal to which a liturgical text points—problematic when one realises that any particular congregation's worship practice only approximates the suggestions liturgical resources offer. The issue of authority itself constitutes a conundrum: who gets to define what is normative?

The work of both Dix and Johnson reflects the idea that the universality of the truth is the measure of the particular. Without a focus on a singular universal, so the argument goes, there is no way to anchor the concrete instance, and no method by which people can agree in assigning value. Against this, I argue that paying attention to particular bodies and their stories, along with acknowledging the partiality of knowledge, does not mean that all values are levelled off. On the contrary, attending to concrete practice points towards an absolute value for the body because liturgical practice always requires some form of bodily participation. This is where the notions of strong objectivity, situated knowledge, the incompleteness of knowledge, and collaboration—as discussed in the conclusion to the first part of this thesis—come in. Considering meaning to be relative to a person's embodiment and location calls for people to work together to determine value in a shared project of attempting to understand a complex and nuanced world.

Yes, the discussion of common ground among different instances and of the defining characteristics of complex phenomena is important for naming things, discerning the identity of actions and ascribing a portion of the meaning of embodied life. Such theological systematisation acts as a structural investigation, proposing an understanding of various bodies and stories and their relationships. Looking to formal principles allows people to discuss what something is, and to explore what group relationships might exist (in this, meaning is produced through categorisation).¹¹

¹¹ This categorisation is different from the use of bodies as stepping-stones towards metaphorical concepts which I critiqued previously in this thesis. Instead of using bodies as a resource for understanding something else—even the divine—categorisation involves the identification of similarities and differences, allowing the investigation of what the relationships between different bodies might reveal about them.

Although such formal understanding can give significant insights, it does not follow that this constitutes the only important type of knowledge. Restricting knowledge to principles and governing structures reduces the breadth of questions which investigators ask, particularly when privileging the ‘what’ of things—the content—over questions of ‘how’.¹² For example, after Johnson demonstrates the likelihood that the earliest Christian liturgical tradition actually was a multiplicity of traditions, he proceeds to diminish the importance of this. He gives an exhaustive list of practical differences, declaring that

The diversity we encounter in the first few centuries, then, is precisely a diversity in *how* things were done: how baptism and its various supplemental rites were celebrated; how Sunday and festival observance were structured...; how the meal, together with the proclamation of the word, was celebrated and its gifts gathered and distributed; how the meal prayers were to be prayed and what their various structural components were to be; how catechumens were prepared for initiation; and how the various ministries of oversight and service might be ordered.¹³

Yet, for all of this, the ‘universal pattern’ still ‘did appear to transcend local diversity and variety’.¹⁴ The list of differences suddenly does not matter much at all; Johnson suggests that these merely are externals, while internally, the meaning of what these various churches did was really the same. This kind of argumentation ends up flattening the texture of embodied life, levelling material features to get to the ‘real’ meaning which they, essentially, cover up.

Resistance to the particular and the concrete in favour of the abstract crystallises in Dix’s presentation of the eucharistic four-fold action, which neglects to mention a crucial bodily component of the rite: the actual eating and drinking. Instead, the fourth and final action, in his words, is ‘communion’ when ‘the bread and wine are distributed together’.¹⁵ You must make an effort to imagine the way that the elements are shared and then consumed; taking, blessing, and breaking each comprise very specific and quite circumscribed actions, but ‘distribution’ is more amorphous. Ingestion, when the elements actually become part of human flesh, stands in a moment of liturgical silence. I suspect that the term ‘distribution’ is used in order to contain all the multitude of

¹² For more, see the discussion on ‘strong objectivity’ in the concluding section of Part One.

¹³ Johnson 68.

¹⁴ Johnson 68.

¹⁵ Dix 48.

practices by which bread and wine make their way from person to person, and the many different rituals marking exactly when people should eat or drink, from one particular Christian gathering to another. It is an abstraction meant to hold all the local variations which, on close reading, manages to evoke very little about what happens.¹⁶

Take the bread and the wine, fashioned and offered out of what has been harvested from the earth. Give thanks for what has been gathered and prepared, blessing God for what God has done, is doing, and will do. Break the bread, pour the wine. Share out the pieces and the cup, then eat and drink in attendance upon one another. Just so, hands proffer and receive the elements, break and pour. Eyes watch the sacrament unfold; ears strain to pick up cues, listen to the old tale, follow those prayers. People move: standing, sitting, kneeling, turning to each other, walking. Tongues pray and speak responses; lips accept food. Bodies are involved—but, sometimes, for all that is written about liturgy, you would not know it.

¹⁶ Observing the four actions is not restricted to Dix's account of the Eucharist, of course, for they correspond to Jesus' actions in the Synoptic Gospels' accounts of the institution of the sacrament (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19). They are, for example, mentioned as 'four stages' of the Eucharist in the United Church of Canada's 1932 *Book of Common Order* (p. v) before Dix. However, the commonality of the reference does not change the analysis here; Dix still represents a liturgical reluctance to mention actual eating and drinking.

Interlude: An Invitation

*The presiding minister moves to the table to offer
the INVITATION TO THE LORD'S TABLE.*

This is the joyful feast of the people of God!
They will come from east and west,
and from north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God. *Luke 13:29.*

According to Luke,
when our risen Lord was at table with his disciples,
he took bread, blessed,
broke it and gave it to them.
Then their eyes were opened
and they recognized him. *Luke 24:30, 31.*

This is the Lord's table.

Our Saviour invites all those who trust him
to share the feast which he has prepared.
O taste and see that the Lord is good. *Ps. 34:8a.¹⁷*

You move from the pulpit to the table. The communion hymn has been sung. Prayers have been said, stories told, scripture read, a sermon preached: it is time for the feast, time to offer forth bread of life and a cup of heaven. You check your papers one last time: the words of Invitation you have printed out, the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving on the pages you have removed from their binder, the slips of paper with your own changes, and with the narrative of the institution. You check your notes, but people are waiting; the ones who have come from the edges of the map wait to be fed. You want everything to be just right. You stare at those first words. You were ordained for this. You were called into an order to serve at this table, to circle the world round a point of flesh, to remember the body and praise the mysteries of blood. You glance up and see everyone's expectation. There is no more time. You take a deep breath, and begin.

But that breath holds aeons. It holds the knowledge that you invite people to a strange feast. No one will eat to overflowing on the morsel of bread or get drunk from the sip of unfermented wine. This is not very much to anchor a person in their own skin, let alone in the embrace of another.

Still, that breath carries the attention of bodies. Though what you see is not all eager anticipation. Look around. Faces also show weariness, boredom, and wary apprehension. Eyes follow the cast of thoughts to far-away places. You cannot fathom all their intimacies and resignations. You do not know all the lines that intersect here, all the narratives borne by these bodies, especially not all the other bodies they bring with them. Even so, you do know some, have

¹⁷ BCW 34.

been afforded glimpses, have walked some of the same topography. You are part of some of the same stories. You share in shaping them, and they in shaping you.

After all, that breath you take takes you, too. Takes your secrets and your desires. Takes in the ones you fear and the ones you love. That breath takes what is inscribed on your body, the slightest sound of moving air a breeze off the entrance to an abyss getting ready to rewrite the words on your skin, to trace them again. You bring all that you are to this table. You bring the scent of a lover, the casual touch of a companion, the weight of nail marks in hidden places: sweet words, griefs and mercies.

You also bring the agony of people who are not there, people who cannot, will not, ever join you at this table, though they might already be bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, though their hands might steady you when you come near to falling, or their magnetism rearrange the direction of your molecules. A relative, a partner—persons of a different Christian tradition or another faith altogether: your body groans to the marrow with knowing that the person who kisses you good night and good morning could not receive the bread of heaven without becoming someone else. The body you preach to hold and heal the world tastes of ashes and bitter tears to them. Yet they love you, even as you point to hope the only way you know how: in fragments, to share.

Sacramental Geography: Part One

The quest for liturgical principles Dix and Johnson engage in centres on distilling essential meaning from the ritual actions of Christian worship; it strives to determine what characteristics must be present to make an assembly's time of worship a truly Christian one. Yet that is not the only possible approach by liturgical theologians, as can be seen in the work of Gordon Lathrop. Although Lathrop also professes belief in a basic pattern at the heart of Christian liturgy (what he calls the '*ordo*'),¹⁸ he argues that the liturgy works to transform the way that people see the world around them and relate to it. As people understand the world differently under the influence of the *ordo* of worship, and as they craft liturgical words and actions from that world, they gradually change the world.¹⁹

In the first book of a trilogy on liturgical theology, Lathrop concentrates upon the various items with which Christians interact in worship. These holy things ('primarily a book, a water pool, bread and wine on a table' but also 'secondarily fire, oil, clothing, a chair, images, musical instruments') constitute material objects which 'take on meaning in action as they are used' in a Christian assembly.²⁰ These things are not restricted to articles which people may physically manipulate; Lathrop also refers to concepts, as, for instance, when he notes that the worshipping assembly 'may be regarded as a *thing*, in the archaic old Norse and old English sense—that is, a gathering of people with a purpose, an assembly of the free and responsible ones'.²¹ The key concept for Lathrop is what he calls 'juxtaposition': while everything he points to has roots in ordinary, daily human life, new meaning happens when the things are placed

¹⁸ HT 35.

¹⁹ That this conception of worship involves a positive change to human social orders becomes even clearer when Lathrop discusses the place of culture and 'cultural materials', such as works of art, in worship (HT 222-4). He argues that cultural objects should be transformed to follow the purpose of the Christian assembly, not just at the level of individual works and the way that they fit with the values that a worshipping community strives to profess, but also in the very systems by which these objects are understood, so that cultural material is reordered and given new meaning in a liturgical context. In other words, this proclaims that participants in Christian liturgy should think differently about the culture which they inhabit; because they think differently, they act differently, modifying that culture.

²⁰ HT 10.

²¹ HT 10. Emphasis in original.

beside each other in the context of worshipping God.²² Holiness is only manifested in such assembled relationship. The importance placed upon proximity causes Lathrop to emphasise the local nature of worship to a much greater degree than either Dix or Johnson. Lathrop declares that ‘since Christian liturgy only exists in local communities—ritual books being not the liturgy itself but only helps for maintaining the great tradition in actual assemblies—the local meeting is the proper focus for liturgical criticism’.²³ Liturgy is not the pattern but the action of a specific assembly, though theologians may look to patterns to help interpret, explain, and critique the liturgical action.

If what happens in specific places as communities use things which have been deemed sacred becomes key for a theological understanding of liturgy, then exactly how those communities conceive the space interior and exterior to their locations becomes significant, too. Lathrop contends that liturgy, by orienting participants to the space around them in a certain way, acts like a map. He writes that

It is proposed for us that God has a gracious map of the world, different from that drawn by national or ideological boundaries and only suggested by the history of sacred groves. In bath and word and meal, Christ locates us in that map, draws our experience into the experience of a meaningful world, of every *here* and every wild, untamable *there*, as now full of grace, as now waiting for grace. When culture forgets place and ideology lies about it, our being in Christ—that is, being in the meeting in these central things as they are empowered by the Spirit—gives us a place in God’s good world.²⁴

Christian liturgy not only has a pattern, it makes a pattern by ordering perception of the world. For Christ to locate Christians in a map of the world also means that Christ bestows that map—that participation in liturgy imprints a geography upon the participants.

²² See HT 10-1, 42, 204-5, among just a few of the places where the writer points to juxtaposition. At first, the term seems weak for the production or revelation of meaning, as juxtaposition does not imply any necessary or causal connection between things other than close proximity. However, I think that Lathrop very intentionally uses the term ‘juxtaposition’ to highlight the idea that Christian liturgy simultaneously involves harmony and tension; juxtaposition does imply comparison and contrast between things which, in turn, brings those who apprehend such things to the beginning of interpretation. Lathrop certainly stresses that the relationship between holy things and (holy) people does not remain static, and that the holy things of liturgy carry critique as well as affirmation (see specifically the chapter on ‘The Biblical Pattern of Liturgy’, 15-32).

²³ HT 162.

²⁴ HT 109. Italics in original.

Lathrop goes into the implications of liturgy-as-map in more detail in his later book, *Holy Ground*. The interpretation that a map offers can become the conception which users have of the region in which they are trying to orient themselves. ‘In a certain sense,’ Lathrop writes,

map is territory. That is, maps are cultural artifacts conveying the values and meanings of a culture as it orients itself in the cosmos, in its own version of an ordered world. To the very large extent that “territory” is also a cultural construct, a map of such territory can represent the value and meaning of the territory and thus be that territory to the map’s users.²⁵

Insofar as a liturgy conveys certain interpretations about the world as God’s creation, that liturgy reconstructs the world by redrawing the map. For instance, Lathrop refers to baptism as ‘an enacted *mappamundi* [*sic*]’ because the sacrament, by initiating people into a Christian community, reorders their world.²⁶ The map image presents liturgy as a conceptual system which inculcates ethical value towards creaturely life; Lathrop asserts that ‘this *ordo* does not so much articulate a specific ecological agenda’ but ‘does constantly, repeatedly, form its participants in a world-view that includes a love for the conditions of the flesh’.²⁷ He depicts liturgy as a map of ‘a few known centres’ which orients the community’s negotiation of the ‘surrounding wilderness’.²⁸ Liturgies delineate the lines by which worship traces and makes the world in which worshippers are situated.

While Lathrop’s mapping model uses a liturgical pattern as the measure of Christian worship, instead of thinking of this as a core which governs everything, he conceives the pattern as the shape within which can be plotted a range of possibilities. His insistence that Christian liturgy contains both affirmation and critique is important for imagining such a space: when Lathrop writes about his geographical metaphor for liturgy, the opposing pair becomes what he calls ‘locative’ and ‘liberative’ functions. Liturgy acts as a locative geography when it gives people a place, anchoring people to particular ground, acting against forces that would uproot people and cause them to drift in a state of insecurity and a lack of peace. This constructs protective limits and

²⁵ HG 99

²⁶ HG 104.

²⁷ HG 127.

²⁸ HG 220.

provides a home.²⁹ However, liturgy can be liberative when its map of the world allows people to imagine a place other than where they are; this counteracts any oppressive structures built around excessive localisation, when the limits around ‘home’ become prison walls, particularly for the weak and the disenfranchised. Liturgy’s liberative geography creates networks of mutual support for working towards a realisation of freedom and for holding onto a hope of salvation.³⁰ When liturgy’s *ordo* is fully and properly present, both locative and liberative functions operate in the Church’s worship; anything else acts as a distortion to some degree or other.³¹ The tension between the locative and the liberative stretches the liturgical pattern into a shape and marks out a space.

Such a conception of liturgy makes room, it seems, for difference and particularities. It upholds the idea that the flesh matters, and that bodies remain present in divine service. This would appear to address concerns I raised earlier. After looking closer, however, disquiet remains. Although Lathrop wants to use the imagery of geography, he circumscribes it quite severely. Note that his book on *Holy Ground* is subtitled *A Liturgical Cosmology*, not a ‘geography’. To speak of liturgy as a map or geography is restricted to being a metaphor, he writes, because ‘Worship is, of course, no topography lesson, no essay on the interdependence of landmass, living creatures, and weather’.³² He continues on to declare that

There are limitations to the metaphor. We need to see that liturgy is not writing and study, not any kind of “graphy.” The liturgy may be more like binoculars, map, and compass together in the hands of a group that is walking in the field. Or it may be the group’s seeing a distant peak, finding a nearby spring, and, with that help, reading the map and walking carefully and accurately in the world.³³

On the one hand, this underlines a desire to show that the Church does liturgy in the world; Lathrop emphasises the praxis element of worship. On the other hand, though, this also pushes away notions of creative interaction: the part of geography that is

²⁹ HG 99-100. For an example of how this works with baptism see HG 105-8.

³⁰ HG 100. An example of how this works with baptism is in HG 108-10. Lathrop draws his discussion concerning these dialectical forces from sociological studies of ritual mappings of the world, primarily the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, but also Mary Douglas.

³¹ HG 111 and 179.

³² HG 56.

³³ HG 57.

excised from the metaphor is exactly that part in which people engage in drawing the map and inscribing their own stories onto the world. As already mentioned, this is a *given* geography, a map that has been established from elsewhere (by God). The best that one can do is to follow the map correctly. So, although Lathrop readily recognises that there are many different kinds of maps through which human beings give order to the world and that the maps of creation that liturgy proposes stand ‘in dialogue with the other maps by which we live’, the liturgical map remains exceedingly static.³⁴ In the end, for all the emphasis on the local and the particular, what matters most of all is only how well those local communities demonstrate the overarching and unitary *ordo*. The danger facing any local assembly is that improper action will block the perception of the liturgical map; conversely, the best worship practices will clarify a common vision of the shape of the world that Christian liturgy makes available through interaction with its holy things.³⁵ While human participation in God’s work can reveal truth, there is a marked reluctance to say that human beings participate in making truth.

Why does this matter? Certainly, questions concerning the precise way that God calls human beings to join in God’s salvific work have a long argumentative history.³⁶ Yet, even barring a long discussion on the topic of the extent of human participation in the construction of the kingdom of God—however one might understand that—one can begin to adumbrate the place of the body and of flesh in creation. I believe that one cannot take the body seriously without also taking seriously the stories which that body carries. Even as Lathrop’s idea of the liturgy-as-map esteems the local assembly, it seems to esteem the map more. The world-view of the Christian liturgy and the narrative told by its things and their patterns take priority over particular stories and imaginations in a way that suggests replacement. While some theologians might see this as a route to maintain the sovereignty of God and divine authorship of all that is, the account does not address human creativity and artistic gift except in a rather negative way. This surely leaves open the possibility of a tyrannical reading in which the goodness of the *ordo*, however merciful, subjugates all. It also does not do justice to the creative ways that human beings actually use maps: we add value to certain places—

³⁴ HG 102.

³⁵ HG 62. See also HT 223-5.

³⁶ See Hall, ‘The World and Humanity as Professed by Faith’, in *Professing the Faith* 187-252, for an overview of the history of the theological discussion.

where we have been, where we have a story attached to a name, where also we dream of going. Add to this our relationships with other people, and the care our imagination takes in making meaning out of the proximity between us and those we know, and our desires and memories do leave marks on the world. To deny this means denying what seems an essential part of bodies and stories.³⁷

³⁷ See Hetherington, 1933-44, for a good introduction to the way maps, familiarity and value can be embodied.

Interlude: Anamnesis

Holy and merciful God:
 you gave your Son for the life of the world,
 who, being truly and eternal God,
 took flesh and became human for us and for our salvation.
 Not as we ought but as we are able,
 we offer you thanks
 for his incarnation,
 for his life on earth,
 for his sufferings and death upon the cross,
 for his resurrection from the dead,
 for his glorious return to your right hand
 until he comes again in glory.³⁸

Caro salutis est cardo

*Flesh is the pivot of salvation,
 Tertullian wrote, which means God's working out
 redemption through the hand writing down
 this poem, through eyes which read it and ears
 which hear it. Which means that leavening grace
 resounds, too, in the heart which beats these lines
 as a forge's bellows to fan aflame
 the white-hot coals seeded in the body
 by words, by touch or look, by time that's spent
 with someone dear. Only, it's the ashes
 from this burning which, piling up in flesh,
 can weigh you down, make your moments heavy
 with the inescapable other. That's
 the hardest part to trust, that this clenched weight
 is itself a seed, that God with great care
 will crack its husk open and bring a bloom
 at last from all that falls between our flesh.*

³⁸ BCW 87.

The Theologians and the Theorists: A Reprise

Lathrop's construing the *ordo* of the Christian assembly as a map is not that different from the theological moves studied in the first part of this thesis. All of their authors, like Lathrop, strive to account for human beings' relationship to embodiment and materiality. All of them neglect some of the particularities of bodies even while trying not to lose sight of either embodiment or materiality. Of course, they are not looking for exactly the same answers or asking the same questions. Lathrop's presentation of liturgy as an orientation of perception constitutes an investigation into the purpose of Christian worship and what Christ's followers have been called upon to do. Graham Ward's discussion of bodies and their significance explores the connection between incarnation and salvation. Stanley Hauerwas's interest in bodies and stories is part of his overall concern with the way the Christian faith's narrative tradition forms individuals into a community. Marcella Althaus-Reid turns to bodies in her quest to liberate theological method from androcentric, imperialistic discourse. The analysis of embodiment in Paul Ricoeur's work stands alongside his examinations of creative language and identity as a component of his exploration of human capability. That they all set out on different routes of inquiry but still end up avoiding the unruly particularities of bodies points toward theological and/or philosophical tendencies additional to the primary aims of their projects. However, it is much too simple to say that Christian theology has always denigrated the physical body, and that the various theological endeavours which I have studied demonstrate that it is exceedingly difficult to escape the weight of the tradition.

When Lathrop treats liturgy as an orientation tool for figuring out what following Christ means for the way that one walks on the earth, he joins Hauerwas and Ward in seeking an explication of the function of liturgical practice—Ward, as has been noted, focuses on the Eucharist as the mediation of the body of Christ, while Hauerwas views Christian liturgy as a primary location for teaching and learning the gospel narrative which assembles the body of Christ. The three of them also join Althaus-Reid in looking to theology for an aid in determining right living, utilising theology's prescriptive aspects. Finally, Ricoeur seems the odd one out, but he also shows an interest in just relationships between persons. Yet, for all of them, few specific bodies or relationships ever appear, except as illustrations. The exception, of course, is Jesus, but even though he is a particular person who does not seem to be a mere illustration of a

concept, as Christ he is susceptible of assuming whatever shape theologians give him: Ward's transcorporeal Saviour, Hauerwas's Redeemer who reveals God's story, the first-fruits of Althaus-Reid's bisexual Christology, and Lathrop's map-making Messiah are as different from one another as are each theologian's interests. In other words, even the particularity of this man, Jesus of Nazareth, tends to fade from view. It just may be that an irresolvable tension exists between the impulse to share theological direction with as many people as possible and any desire to foreground the particularities of places and your neighbour; inclusivity can seem threatened by any particularity that emphasises difference, while the actual experience of multiplicity and the rich complexity of people and places quickly complicates ethical teachings.

It also may be that the unpredictability of bodies in relationship, with particular choices and accidents of fate which bring a person into contact with specific bodies in specific locations, is too uncontrollable for any systematic attempt at explicating the experience of divine mystery to accept. The unruliness of bodies, then, begs to be tamed, so that the temptation facing theologians is to smooth jagged edges as much as possible. Hence, Ward presents the notion that bodies are known only in relationships with other bodies, and that because of this they are always changing, yet attempts to make this instability palatable by fixing displacement within the ascended body of Christ; in the end, the messiness of embodied relationship is neatly contained within transcendent divinity. Hauerwas writes of bodies as being shaped by practices particular to the specific stories that people live by, which would make differences between sets of stories and their resultant practices extremely significant while celebrating bodily peculiarity; however, instead of attending to an ungainly, ever-multiplying plurality of human stories, Hauerwas chooses one version of the Christian story as normative and ignores or alienates all other narratives, thereby simplifying any account of the stories that form bodies. Althaus-Reid attempts to highlight the untidiness of the body by focusing on the intimacies of the flesh—the meetings of skin and bodily fluids by which lovers strain the boundaries between one another—but still rarefies bodies and their stories into concepts which govern theological method, allowing an opportunity for jagged edges to be ignored once again. For Ricoeur, the body is the pivotal location where a person meets the world, and is largely productive of meaning, but the unpredictability of bodily creativity and the narratives through which people understand their lives over time is nevertheless restricted so that they remain within respectable boundaries. Similarly, Lathrop values the local nature of liturgical observance and, with

it, the embodied nature of participants who follow the liturgical map, but largely confines the action of those participants to the interpretation of what has been provided for them by faith's ordering of the world; this carefully keeps the unruliness of the creativity of bodies under control. In all of these examples, the desire to promote the importance of the corporeal nature of human beings and their relationships runs up against a deep impulse to maintain the ability to manage the chaos produced by flesh. Of all the approaches to embodiment and meaning that I have studied, the only one which offers release from the impasse brought on by a fear of unruliness comes from the feminist epistemological humility which recognises that knowledge is always situated but incomplete: the urge to make bodies neat dissipates under the realisation that the quest for true understanding enjoins a person into collaborations where progress may be sparked by bodily desire and indiscretion.

Interlude: Epiclesis

By your Word and Spirit, O God,
sanctify these your own gifts of bread and wine,
that the bread which we break may be to us
a communion in the body of Christ,
and the cup of blessing which we bless may be
a communion in the blood of Christ.³⁹

You pray the words, calling down the Spirit of God, the breath of life, to stir up the bits of bread and ferment the grape juice. You pray for God to turn dismembering into remembering, to make flesh resonate, to play sinews like violin strings and bones like piano keys, to make all of our marrow sing. You pray God will make God's presence known in passing the lightest of crumbs and smallest of cups from one person to the next, with a smile, a word, a silence, a name. You plead for God to fine-tune all our ears, too, to listen to the offers and requests of others and, on hearing, turn.

Communion in the body—the words intimate to you sanctuaries of embrace.

Communion in the blood—abide, abide, as close as can be, meeting and mingling the beating of hearts.

Because there are so many communions in the body and the blood: sensuousness of touch, hands holding, lips kissing, bodies entwining. You have seen this, known this, guessed this. Wherever people move towards one another, there is the risk of learning once again that bodies are flammable. Wherever people share in sustenance, even cubed bread and unfermented wine, the latent sparks threaten to fly.

Abide. Abide. There are so many communions, and the prayer carries them all, asking for blessing. Stories of fragile hearts, glances that stun, the point between light and dark long sorrows at parting—or joining: all are communions. Brothers circling warily, collapsing on a couch in front of the television; polite conversation at the family dinner; ominous clearing of throats; the sense of one you love stepping out the door: all are communions. Fellowship, laughter, dancing, sing-along time on the road trip: all are communions. At the midnight crib, at wit's end, at the death-bed, at the voiceless stop of the spine at the sight of your beloved: communions, all of them.

Abide. Abide. There are so many communions present in this praying.

³⁹ BCW 87.

Sacramental Geography: Part Two

In all fairness to Gordon Lathrop, his idea of the liturgy-as-map truly is an attempt to give a positive place to particularity, partiality and plurality in Christian liturgical theology. He declares that

There is an appropriate, limited beauty in our ability to see only what is before us and to see farther only with exceptional instrumental help. From a Christian point of view, we are invited to love and respond to what is actually before us, not long to see through it to something else, something bigger.⁴⁰

Lathrop also proclaims that the Christian liturgical map should never be a ‘polemic against all other cosmologies’.⁴¹ Just as he notes that this map may be properly understood as both locative and liberative, his theological work strives for a balance that points to an anchoring of Christian identity in both the hope for the rejuvenation of one’s own belonging to a particular community and the mission of seeking justice and peace for all. The problem is that this does not go far enough. Lathrop’s theology still hesitates to ascribe changeability to the liturgical map—to allow bodies’ stories to matter in such a way that they inscribe traces upon the world. This reluctance to see human beings as co-workers in making the world reveals a theological fear of instability: if the map can be changed, drawn and re-drawn over and over, there is the possibility that the map will not have the power to effect a redemptive reorientation of the world, as the peril of disintegration would be too great. Yet, without such instability, can there be any real, substantive positive change either?

But Lathrop himself suggests an answer in the passage quoted above concerning partiality and the limitations of human sympathies: words about love. He notes that love is always specific and located. You love a person, a place, a thing, a group, or maybe even a situation, yet to love a person not for herself or himself but for what he or she represents—for what you ‘see through’ them—is reductive of love, as it does not address the whole of embodied life. This suggests that love involves a relationship in which one enters into at least the possibility of knowing and being known. This appeal

⁴⁰ HG 103.

⁴¹ HG 223.

to love links Gordon Lathrop to another, very different theologian, Charles Winquist, who, at the end of his book *Desiring Theology*, also turns to the ‘particular and singular’ nature of the experience of love.⁴² Winquist writes that

Romantic lovers often discover that their world has been transformed. The contingencies that are indexed on the trajectories of their love, a taverna where they first met, a shabby apartment, a city, are specifically valued with a different intensity. The world in its finite display is given importance in the lovers’ discourse.⁴³

This, too, is geographical; to be more precise, it is cartographical, an exercise in map-making. Lovers mark intimate places, scribing the topographies both of their bodies and of the locations bound up in the story of their love. Maps as we know them—on paper spread out before us, hanging on a wall, folded up in a pocket, inserted into a book’s frontispiece as reader’s aid—are flat representations of a multidimensional, uneven landscape, but upon reading a map and linking some of its symbols to places of personal significance, we begin to change the map’s texture, disrupting the smooth surface as we layer it with varied intensities at points of events in our own stories. As Winquist notes, such value only has meaning because love is always ‘specific and contingent on place and time’.⁴⁴ In valuing this particularity of place, the theologies of Winquist and Lathrop approach one another quite closely, except that Winquist presents the ‘graphy’ part of ‘geography’ as integral to his theological discourse, and not as the problem that Lathrop assumes that it is.

For Winquist, the transformation of the world effected by love’s transformation of embodied relationships links to theology through the potent but fragile work of creating communities and selves. He declares that both the discourse of lovers and the thought of theologians seek ‘joy in populating one’s world with “matters” of great importance’.⁴⁵ Just like people in love, Winquist’s ideal theologians go round attaching significance to points on the surface of the earth, to bodies and other materialities—the ‘matters’ that he mentions. Earlier in *Desiring Theology*, Winquist discusses ‘the

⁴² Winquist 149.

⁴³ Winquist 149.

⁴⁴ Winquist 149. Note that this specificity inherent in love is not restricted to the romantic variety; though romance provides Winquist with his most striking images, he also speaks of a child’s love, and it is evident that love’s variety includes friendship, sibling devotion, parental care, and more.

⁴⁵ Winquist 150.

incorrigibility of the body', pointing to the 'animality' of human beings which issues in bodily desires and the susceptibility of the flesh to the impact of external forces.⁴⁶ The resistance of bodies to being neatly pinned down gives them the potential to interrupt the smoothness of dominant cultural discourses. This, along with the importance of place, prepares the way for Winqvist's conception of theology as a 'minor literature' and the significant valuation that he gives to love. Winqvist argues that theology does not have 'a *place of its own*' in the postmodern world; instead, it is left to 'the margins and interstices of the dominant culture'.⁴⁷ But far from being the downfall of the discipline, this allows theology to be a discourse of resistance, to make space for itself by disrupting dominant discourses whose actions exclude and oppress. Thus, as a 'minor literature', theology uses 'unsafe texts'—that is, unsafe in that their meanings cannot easily be controlled—to provoke the realisation that no text is ever really safe or even complete.⁴⁸ Of the strategies involved, Winqvist recognises some as 'topological' or 'topographical' which 'prepare surfaces for the recording or marking of theological texts' and are 'for the liberation of excluded voices'.⁴⁹ Such strategies are deeply implicated with place and situated bodies because they work to insinuate theological discourse into specific locations, reinterpreting as they complicate the surface of what seems monolithic, making space for difference and freeing a place for the excluded other by elaborating endlessly upon reality.⁵⁰ By working in the margins and interstices, theological thought labours to build up selves and communities under the realisation that this is always 'a work of becoming', 'always unfinished'.⁵¹ This, then, is how the map-making of lovers is theological: it complexifies the experience of life, adding to the diversity of the world and liberating people from meaninglessness.

Winqvist's presentation of the tracing of relationships of bodies to one another and to place respects the creative capacity of human beings while recognising the

⁴⁶ Winqvist 36-7, 12-6.

⁴⁷ Winqvist 127, 128. Italics in original.

⁴⁸ Winqvist 129, 131, 133. He gets the term from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Winqvist 127n1).

⁴⁹ Winqvist 129, 130. The other kind of strategy mentioned is 'tropological', which works by 'disrupting discourse from within its practice' (130). In other words, moral/ethical considerations generate self-critique.

⁵⁰ See Winqvist 37-9.

⁵¹ Winqvist 141.

precarious nature of the geographies which we compose. The fragility of theological constructions of bodies in relationship derives from their foundation in love; as Winquist notes, ‘To be in love is to always be at risk’.⁵² Nothing ever guarantees love will last, and love always depends on more than any single, solitary body. Indeed, the theological endeavour which Winquist projects is ever risky; minor literatures and the prospect of forever being in process are unsettled and unsettling. But this is not a problem for a discipline that precisely aims to unsettle. In *Desiring Theology*, the task of the topographies generated by theological thinking is to nudge people out of complacency by pointing out the strangeness of the textures of the world.

However, while Winquist gives a strong reading of what Lathrop would call the liberative aspect of Christianity’s liturgical map (though it should be noted that Winquist’s work neither specifies Christianity explicitly nor mentions liturgy), Winquist gives less emphasis to the other side of topographical endeavours, what Lathrop calls locative: the recognition of home. Winquist spends most of his effort when discussing the significance of place in presenting them as other—stressing travel’s allure in the defamiliarisation from one’s normal life that helps to reconstitute understanding with new experiences.⁵³ Everything is an adventure, a gamble with unknown outcomes. But this neglects the idea that some places are so thick with memories and meanings that they are familiar, ‘of the family’; these make the home that anchors people, affording what safety there may be for bodies to have room to grow in a space of nurturing and care. If we return to Lathrop’s concept of liturgy providing a reorientation of one’s views of the world, a mapping of a community’s place and direction, we can find a robust account of the way that maps help to place people, providing a sense of belonging in the texture of a specific tradition of worship. With both theologians recognising the subversive potential of theological geographies, what is needed is to combine Lathrop’s liturgical sense of maps that nourish roots with Winquist’s notion of human participation in the composition of topographies through the identification of locations which are important for the particularities of one’s existence in proximity to others.⁵⁴

⁵² Winquist 148.

⁵³ Winquist 37-8.

⁵⁴ William T. Cavanaugh, ‘The World in a Wafer: A Geography of the Eucharist as Resistance to Globalization’, *Modern Theology* 15.2 (1999): 181-96, gives an altogether different theological view of maps and geography than either Lathrop or Winquist, presenting maps as primarily demonstrating

The imagined theological topographies resulting from a Winquist and Lathrop rendezvous return this thesis to Michèle Le Doeuff and her point that orientation requires not just reading a map properly but choosing the correct map in the first place. In effect, keeping this in mind means carrying around on your person a multitude of large-scale maps, a variety of plans charting landscape in close detail rather than breadth, from which you may choose depending on where you need or want to go. That choice will always be conditional. It will always bear the background knowledge that any map selected has edges beyond which might be uncharted territory; upon reaching an edge, you will be faced with other choices: to turn back, to plunge forward into the unknown, or to step out cautiously and draw your own map as you go. And the choice of map will depend very much on bodies—ones you meet, and ones you wish to meet.

modernity's hunger for omniscience. Cavanaugh picks up Michel de Certeau's distinction between itineraries and maps, arguing that the Eucharist is an itinerary, a 'spatial story' that tells how to move from one place to another, and not a map, which attempts to represent spaces in their 'proper place' related to one another, thereby granting users a 'detached and universal' view that gives control to those who own the making of the map (183, 191-2). But while these are important points, Cavanaugh does not reckon with the opportunity for a lack of charity towards others that arises from an itinerary's ignoring of places and people outwith its prescribed route, nor does he observe that people also use maps to get from one place to another, and that the attempt by mapmakers to render all territory homogeneous within the bounds of a map fails as soon as people read it and attach different values based on the level of their interest.

Interlude: Fraction

The minister breaks bread in the presence of the people, saying:

The Lord Jesus,
on the night ~~before he died~~ *that he was betrayed*,
took bread,
and after giving thanks to God,
he broke it and said,
"This is my body, that is for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."⁵⁵

*Hear. After midnight the silence bends, twists
and shatters; not with violent shout, no,
not with the clamour of blade-bite and blow,
nor angry footfalls, pushes, flurried fists,
but with the lover's summons to the trysts
of early morn. From assignations flow
the wedding song's rehearsals and the slow
ordination of passion. Of all lists
of our Redeemer-King's virtues, it takes
a Psalmist's to recount music. Listen!
He sings for his bride. The woman flits in,
her body called to the Lord's nuptial bed.
Hear the call and response, how each voice shakes
what's bred in the flesh, what the flesh gives as bread.*

The minister may pour wine into the cup, then lifts it, saying:

In the same way,
he took the cup after supper, saying,
"This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood.
Whenever you drink it,
do it in remembrance of me."
Every time you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.⁵⁶

*Drink. Yes, drink it all down. Don't worry,
it's only tears. They're fresh, too, still warm
with salt, with the memory of a cheek's
contours. Drink it! For I can't tell you
how many people have wept to fill
your cup. Drink it deeply; know it is
the barium of sorrow for the
x-ray light of God's face. Let this draught
limn out your inward parts. God's regard
will follow the trace of bitterness
out of the abjection of God's self,
the better to see your doubleness
of heart and surgically refocus
your love along passion's treacherous edge.*

⁵⁵ BCW 109.

⁵⁶ BCW 109.

Bodies in Touch: Storytelling, Writing, Loving

Maps are imaginative constructions designed to help us to grasp our intimate implication with the world. They are expressions of our understanding of the form of our life lived in proximity to others, and the effects that we have on the many landscapes that we touch. As discussed above, maps are interactive compositions, too: by the intensity and contour of interpreters' attachment to the locations portrayed on maps, the interpreters build upon the depictions. This map-reading incorporates time with place in a complex relationship pivoting upon the body; that is, for an interpretation of landscape to be partially constructed by the values that the interpreter lays on certain locations assumes that the interpreter has a history, a life full of stories and aspirations, even, moments that have shaped and been shaped by bodies and their relationships. Topographies, chronologies, and flesh intersect.

The interactivity of maps is very similar to that which the five novels I have studied ask of readers. With *Anil's Ghost*, readers must interpret the relations of the different strands of narrative, the place of spectres that follow in characters' wakes, and what it might mean to participate in the witness of truth through being present to another. *A Map of Glass* offers up its stories of lost and fragile loves to be traced upon readers while they share in the novel's task of tracing out the complex marks which the characters leave on themselves, one another, and the world through which they move. *Fugitive Pieces* provides a lesson on what to do with the body and the possibilities which open up in reading lives; readers must negotiate between the two stories which are told, while the author and the text challenge them to join in the restoration of the world through the poetic, creative construction of imagined bodies and relationships. Readers are also challenged to make a choice in *The Man on a Donkey*: interpreting the many different claims on bodies within the interweaving narratives, readers must decide where the weight lies, on tragedy or on hope. *Godric* invites readers to join in the continuing creation of identity, not only of characters but also of authors, an artful collaboration involving writers, readers, and God. In each case, authors present a vulnerable text, knowing that even though they leave readers stringent instructions or

powerful hints, readers will make of the text what they will, and it will never be the same.

In addition, each of the novels works out this interpretative interaction at the point of bodies and their relationships. *Anil's Ghost* portrays people—a forensic anthropologist, an archaeologist, a surgeon—trying to read the truth from bodies, but suggests that such attempts, at best, do not tell the whole story and, at worst, delude and distort with their promise of power over the bodies that are being read. As another option, the novel posits personal, relational touch between bodies, contact which builds, along with truth, meaning in the midst of vulnerability. In *A Map of Glass*, bodies are shaped and marked by the perilous interaction of love and other forces within and without control. People leave traces on the landscape and on one another's bodies, augmenting the world with the artistry of joyous and sorrowing tracers. Bodies and geography are also integral to *Fugitive Pieces*, in which emotional processes are mediated through physical and geological ones. We know such things as love and grief in our bodies, and in our bodily experience of the world; they are related to us in our contact with one another, or in our yearning for that contact, aching for what has been lost. Readers of *The Man on a Donkey* are presented with the body as the intersection of a multitude of stories, as the place where you can follow the traces of different narrative claims. As the characters find themselves caught up in the diverse currents of history, different meanings shoot through the tissue of their bodies and relationships—meanings that come into relief (for readers, at least) in the response to one specific body passing through the novel, the body of Christ. In *Godric*, different accounts of the title character's life, as well as his attempt to discipline his body, are all belied by the tale that the body itself tells, with its own unruliness both sinful and saintly. The body's story manifests through Godric's relationships with the people and other creatures whom he encounters; similarly, the body of the character and the body of the text address author and reader, constructing links between stories, memories, people and places. The body is primarily relational.

A common thread through all of the novels is a concern with the location of bodies in relation to one another and, hence, with emplacement and displacement. From Anil returning to Sri Lanka, to Godric making his home by the River Wear, the bond between bodies and place is complicated by the social structures and personal entanglements that surround people, and by the pushes and pulls of forces that act upon them. The consideration of emplacement and displacement approaches quite closely

Lathrop's notions of the locative and liberative functions of maps: the characters live in the space generated between the poles of being stuck in place and of being rootless, striving ever to negotiate a balance, to have both home and freedom from oppression. However, the novels make manifest an element that Lathrop and other theologians do not talk about very much: things that are accidents. The bodily negotiation of landscape and the reading of maps can seem so deliberate, so much a matter of choice. But so much about bodies' proximity to one another, and about location, occur unintentionally. Fiction excels at depicting the way we work at making meaning from happenstance. So Sylvia meets Andrew the geographer unexpectedly, and the resulting connection proceeds to explode her carefully contained world. Or Jakob is rescued from the Holocaust by a Greek scientist working on a dig in Poland. The unforeseen finds a place in the plot. Still, bodies remain erratic, from moment to moment threatening to do the unexpected, and mark the world with a trace that cuts against the grain.⁵⁷

At first glance, this might not appear to have much to do with liturgy and sacraments. After all, even granting the metaphor of map-reading and the importance of bodies, there is little that seems *accidental* about the celebration of a sacrament, regardless of the specific Christian tradition under discussion. While you can judge a chance occurrence to be sacramental, or like a sacrament,⁵⁸ you cannot have a sacrament by chance: sacramental worship requires the right context, preparation and intent. Nevertheless, another way to look at this is to see that, in the novels, all of the unintentional events in characters' lives are taken up into their history. Their bodies carry their stories with them; the bodies of others also remain present, in the shape they give, the yearnings, aches, and memories which contribute in impelling a person's narrative forward. The novels and liturgies come together at this point of memory: in each novel, embodied memory both expands and restricts the purviews of the characters, breaking into the isolation of the self with the presence of others, but also anchoring that self in particular relationships with particular people and places;

⁵⁷ I am grateful to Andrew Fullerton for pointing this out in conversation. The example he noted came from theatre, where subtle changes in the orientation of an actor's body in relation to another actor during a speech can make immense differences in meaning, but not all matters of staging are intentionally planned—sometimes they happen by accident during the rehearsal: they become part of a particular iteration of a play, and dramatic meaning is ascribed to the action only later, by actor, director, or audience.

⁵⁸ My use of the general adjective 'sacramental' is not to be confused with the more specific substantive use of the word in Roman Catholic theology.

sacraments draw from the well of the past a story, a particular chronology, which contextures the present and the relationships in which one abides. The artistry of the novels enacts remembrance, picking up pieces and putting them together, inviting readers to do the same when joining in the imaginative construction of worlds and the characters who inhabit them. The liturgical actions of sacraments map physical memory through the meetings of bodies, along with prayer consisting of *anamnesis*, the work of remembrance, and *epiclesis*, calling upon God's Holy Spirit.⁵⁹

At a very basic level, the physical elements of sacraments mediate between persons. One person applies the sign of water to another; one person shares a portion of bread, a cup of wine, with another. The memory out of which you live is then not composed only of the stories of sacred tradition but also of and with the people among whom you worship God, and in turn among all the people with whom you live. In a Eucharistic prayer, for instance, one might give thanks to God for sending the Holy Spirit 'that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and rose for us'—and, if for him, then for all others.⁶⁰ The *anamnesis* situates the participant within the community's story as it is remembered; the *epiclesis* calls on God's Spirit so that this might become a true 're-membering'—a re-embodying of the presence of Christ in the story, a continuing of that story in community. Participation in sacraments not only locates a person in a sacred geography of time and space, but also projects forward from where a person is.

At the end of my five studies of novels and literary bodies, in considering *Godric* and Frederick Buechner, I concluded that figuring out what one's identity embodies largely means figuring out with whom you identify, and who will identify with you—and that this is anchored in the body but played out in community. Liturgies

⁵⁹ Although this is most explicit in eucharistic prayers, the same basic components exist in baptismal prayers, too, as the action of the sacrament is linked to giving thanks for the demonstration of God's presence in various events in the narrative of the faith's tradition, including the baptism of Jesus, but often events like the Exodus also. For examples of *anamnesis* and *epiclesis* in eucharistic and baptismal liturgies, see official denominational resources such as *The Sunday Missal*, revised ed. (London: HarperCollins, 2007) of the Roman Catholic Church, the various versions of the *Book of Common Prayer* used in churches of the Anglican tradition, the *Book of Common Order*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press of the Panel on Worship of the Church of Scotland, 1996), the *Book of Common Worship* (1991) of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the book of the same name of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993). For analysis of *anamnesis* in the Eucharist, see Dix 243-7; for an analysis of remembrance in Christian theology, see Richard J. Ginn, *The Present and the Past: A Study of Anamnesis* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1989).

⁶⁰ BCW 99.

with sacramental awareness follow in this vein by being embodied texts of identification, discourses of trust and loyalty. Like the exercise in map-reading suggested by Winquist, participation in a liturgy holds out the possibility of marking the landscape with varying intensities of importance. Yet, it is a collaborative effort, standing *with* others, other people, other bodies, God. Moreover, it is continuous but not necessarily of constant progress; the hermeneutic is fraught with difficulty, inherently recognising the possibility of misidentification, mistrust, and disloyalty—and not only on the part of others.⁶¹ Bodies and stories trace a tentative sacramental landscape in the practice of worship, leaving much to remain wilderness. Relationships themselves are dangerous, demanding of us that nearness to others which renders us vulnerable.

With this sense of the importance of bodies rising out of the particularity of stories, place and people—of those close enough to touch—a greater peril than the fragility of personal interconnections comes from the temptation never to look beyond what you already know. Even the defamiliarisation of moving toward the stranger, or toward some other place, can become regulated by contact that you can control, so that particularity promises nothing but narrowness of vision, blindness towards those whom you will never know half as well as the characters of your favourite novels. The worst iteration of this is a theology of patronage, of like only unto like. Nothing can dissolve this threat: it is a vulnerability borne by the unruliness of bodies. It is also a corollary of privileging difference and partiality that you could quite possibly overlook someone else's partial view with varying degrees of your own spite. But any alternative to living with this risk would mean turning from the way that materiality and form matter, denying significance to the elaborations woven into the landscape by the engagements of bodies.

Near the end of *A Map of Glass*, Sylvia declares that 'The dead are not our friends'. They are whom we have lost, ones for whose presence we long but cannot have, and whose absence diminishes us. But Sylvia misses something, one hopeful thing that works to keep all this from closing in on itself. Her exclamation can be turned backward. The dead may not be our friends, but we are asked to be theirs. Asked to be friends of the absent and the missing. Asked to accompany them in the stories that we tell, and to allow their bodies to linger on our flesh. The bodies of others, of anyone, request that we tend to their wounds, that we bend our backs with care around them,

⁶¹ As discussed in Chapter Six above, n47.

that we sing on their behalf. This, too, is the urging of Jesus of Nazareth, remembered in Christian sacraments. Liturgical bodies carry with them the petition that persons trace lines of connection in attendance upon one another and in the presence of God. They ask us ‘to love as if we’d choose/ even the grief’.

Finale - Communion

THE COMMUNION

*The minister and those who will assist
in serving receive both the bread and wine.
They then proceed to serve the people in
the manner appointed.*

*During the distribution there may be
silence, scriptural sentences may be said
or a hymn may be sung.⁶²*

The hardest part about leading communion is not making sure everything is in order or that your speaking and your actions have been just right. The hardest part comes in that time after all the 'necessary' words have been said, when the bread, and then the wine, is going out to the congregation, the time of sitting and waiting, the silence when all is let go. You have taken the part of Christ, but even you, the minister, must give it back. You, too, must be served. You, too, must be nourished and must be held. You must, in the end, give up control, and be useless. You must let your body rest.

Glasswear

This pendant heart's
vulnerability is the lodestone
on my chest—care-heavy compass needle
which turns me towards another's pole even while
one end pricks my flesh. But for all its weight
the heart hangs fragile, too, and if dropped would
most certainly shatter, shards skidding off
across the underfoot, miniature glass
blades scything out of reach. Then just one prayer
would remain: that, at the end of all things,
someone yet might find every time-worn piece
and put them back together, one by one by one.



⁶² BCW 40.

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Colophon

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